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# **Volume 1      NUMBER 1**

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# INTERNATIONAL

SCIENCE-FICTION

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# SF FILM FESTIVAL

For the past five years the city of Trieste in Italy has been host each July to an international *Festival del Film di Fantascienza* — science-fiction movies. The principal fare offered each year is a dozen or so new feature-length films from all over the world, shown each evening (weather permitting — and weather almost always does permit, in Trieste) in the open-air theater in what was once the courtyard of the medieval Castle San Giusto. But with each of the features a short is usually shown as well; in the afternoons, there is a retrospective showing of some time-honored favorite (this year 1984, Arch Oboler's *Five* and a gaggle of episodes of the *Superman* television series were included); and an assortment of round-table discussions, art exhibits and social events round out the affair — which goes on for ten days or so, after which the attendees go back to their respective countries, lie down and breathe hard for a few days.

This is being written from Trieste, and, as we haven't had the chance to recuperate yet, it may turn out a bit breathless. One thing we're pretty sure of: it is possible to make interesting science-fiction films; and in spite of what we've been seeing all these years on the Late Show and in drive-ins, a lot of people are showing a lot of intelligence and skill in the attempt.

From the hills just outside Trieste you can look down on the border between Italy and Yugoslavia. If there is an Iron Curtain any more,

it is certainly invisible in the peaceful valley that marks that frontier; but at that point you stand with Austria, Germany and Western Europe at your back and the Communist countries stretching for thousands of miles before you. Since science fiction is a world-wide event these days (witness this magazine!), Trieste may well be the most perfectly chosen spot on the planet for this kind of festival. As a matter of fact, the hit of the Festival, at least in feature films, is probably the Yugoslavian *Sedmi Kontinent* — *The Seventh Continent*; while the winner of the *Sigillo d'Oro* for short and medium-length films was the British *The Machine Stops*.

Under the rules of the Festival there is no award for feature films — heaven knows why — but the Gold Medal of the City of Trieste is given for the best of the shorter films, as chosen by an international jury. This year's jury was composed of five people: Valery Petrov, a Bulgarian poet and screenwriter; three film critics — Dilys Powell of England, the Italian, Mario Nordio, and the Belgian, Robert Van Laer; and your editor (who, for his sins, was appointed president of the jury and expected to moderate a discussion carried on in a minimum of two, and sometimes four, languages).

Two of the entries were American; they were well liked, but fell out of competition in the early rounds on the grounds of being not really science fiction by even the kindest definition, since they were simply documentaries of space. (*Toward the Moon*, an episode.



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from the TV series *The Twenty-First Century*, featuring Walter Cronkite operating a moon-crawler on Long Island and Isaac Asimov explaining what will happen to man in null-G; and *Behind the Space-men*, a State Department documentary on the thousands of people whose work is necessary before an astronaut can orbit.)

An interesting French entry was *Love in the Year 2000* — actually not made as a complete film, but a section from a feature-length movie called *Le Plus Vieux Metier du Monde*, or *The Oldest Profession on Earth*. We all know what that is; and this episode had to do with prostitution in the future, where some girls are for sex, and don't talk; and others are for conversation, and don't. The color was original and brilliant; and the full-length film ought to be well worth seeing.

Also French in origin (but curiously, with all the dialogue spoken in heavily American-accented English, with French subtitles) was *L'Ombre dans la Glace* (*The Shadow in the Mirror*), in which an American tourist in Paris is horrified to find himself turning into a Japanese. According to the producer, this is because he is slipping into a parallel world of possibility in which he *would* be Japanese; but we only learned this in conversation; there didn't seem to be much indication of this fact in the film itself.

Four of the entries rested heavily on photography and artistic effects some quite experimental and promising, without much attempt at a story of credible characters in comprehensible surroundings. *La Caduta di Varema* (*The Fall of the Town of Varema*) was windy, cold and depopulated; the Bulgarian *Putiat*

*Kam Pleadite* (*The Road to the Pleiades*) had beautiful crystalline photography of heavens full of stars and galaxies, and some weird extra-terrestrial landscapes (and a weird musical accompaniment, too, apparently achieved by taping a chorus chanting tunes and playing the tape backward) — but not much that was comprehensible; England's *Bluebeard's Last Wife* used an unusual stop-motion technique of animating photographic stills — rather like the sort of thing you used to see by putting a penny into a machine and turning a crank; and the Yugoslavian *Hora Quota Est?* was described as "an experimental film introducing today's man, who is lost in the midst of ghosts of cybernetics and tries to find himself."

Those were the short films that didn't receive awards — though in fact there was a certain amount of sentiment for almost all of them, for one reason or another and with considerable justification. Then there were two animated cartoons that came close to carrying off the gold medal, and in the event did get a silver medal apiece.

From Yugoslavia came *Muha* (*The Fly*) — beautifully drawn and beautifully animated, with only two characters. One is a man who is annoyed by the buzzing of a fly, outwaits it patiently and steps on it. The other is the fly itself which bursts from under his feet, grows huger and huger and finally attempts to tramp on him. Not much to go with? It doesn't sound like a great deal, we admit. But there was the man — alone, with no hint of where he had come from, what he was doing there, what kind of a world he lived in — and there was the fly; and, somehow,

between the two of them they managed to produce comedy, excitement and, believe it or not, at the end a feeling of warm delight.

Then there was Canada's *What on Earth?* — made and spoken in French — which was just plain very funny indeed. The Martians, you see, are observing the Earth through powerful telescopes; to their astonishment, they find life! — life everywhere, moving rapidly over the roads, reproducing, dying, being reborn. One little difficulty: what they see moving are cars. They haven't detected any human beings. And this film is a tongue-in-cheek "Martian" documentary about the habits and characteristics of the dominant form of life on Earth: the automobile. As the animation and color are fully up to Walt Disney in technical slickness, and quite a way past him in wit, this one is a delight.

One of the attractive features of these two cartoons is that they're fully international. *The Fly* has no spoken dialogue at all — and needs none — and *What on Earth?* has only an off-screen commentary (delivered, of course, by a "Martian"), which can be easily replaced with whatever language is comfortable to any audience in the world. If you don't see them in your local theaters or on your local TV screens soon, it is due entirely to someone's stupidity.

Then, of course, there was the grand winner of *Il Sigillo d'Oro della Citta di Trieste*, the British BBC production of *The Machine Stops*.

For the past few years BBC has been running a weekly science-fiction series called *Out of the Unknown*. It is what the trade calls an "anthology" series, which simply means that each week's story is in-

dependent of all the stories before and after — unlike, for instance, our own *Star Trek* and *Time Tunnel*, et al., which keep Mr. Spock's ears on display week after week, or always send the two lost tempomats tumbling through a sort of crystalline fourth dimension. Good things can be accomplished in a "formatted" series; some of the *Star Trek* episodes have been particularly good, and it's a pity one or two of them were not shown at the Festival, come to think of it. But that sort of series can't help but waste one of the greatest opportunities science fiction gives: to imagine any kind of universe and populate it as you like — and in your next story turn it upside down completely.

A year or so ago we were able to visit the BBC studios during the shooting of Mordecai Roshwald's *Level Seven* and saw a studio much like the ones at Desilu which turns out *Star Trek*, with people very like *Star Trek*'s people doing the same sort of jobs with the same sort of skill and intelligence. We expected the result would be good, because after all, both programs have done the same sensible thing in employing real science-fiction writers to invent stories for them. And when we saw *The Machine Stops* we were well satisfied.

The story is E. M. Forster's, about a world in which everyone lives underground, isolated from one another except for telecommunication; and Man has turned over control of all his activities to a sort of huge computer called The Machine. Since the story was written well before World War II, and thus well before computers, it's particularly interesting in some ways, and very well done in all ways.

Unfortunately for our hopes of seeing this and other episodes of *Out of the Unknown* on American TV screens, the series has so far been made only in black and white, and all you people with color receivers have convinced the network executives that that is now the kiss of death. But the BBC people are going to remedy that in a year or so. And meanwhile, maybe some of the nets might find it in their hearts to give this intelligent and attractive series at least a partial showing, next time they have to cancel their latest variation of Western shoot-'em-up or zany domestic comedy because of audience apathy. Why, a series like this on the tube might even make people watch the darned thing once in a while, instead of just having it on to keep the house from being too quiet.

Because there were twenty-odd films of one kind or another on display, we didn't manage to see them all. (We did see all the shorts. Had to, you know, to judge them.) Our spies report that a couple features we missed, particularly the British *War Games* and the Czechoslovakian *End of August at the Ozone Hotel*, were well worth seeing — *War Games* for its terrifying exploration of nuclear war, the Czech film for its even more terrifying exploration of the fifteen-year-later consequences of such a war. In the Czech film, nine teen-age girls and an old woman are, as far as they know, the only survivors of the human race; they are searching desperately for a male survivor, in the hope of starting things up again, and as a matter of fact they find one. But he is eighty years old and not much use for the purpose. There

is a good deal of violence in both of these, but not for its own sake. Both pictures are about violence, and they discuss it well.

Thirty years ago and more there was a rash of interesting science-fiction films — the German *Metropolis* and *The Woman in the Moon*, the American *Just Imagine*, the British movie that some still consider the best sf film ever made, H. G. Wells's powerful *Things to Come*. At the same time there was a good deal of kitsch like *FP-1 Does not Answer* and *Transatlantic Tunnel* — gadget stories — and, for that matter, *King Kong*, first and maybe best of the monster movies.

It doesn't really seem that there has been an awful lot of improvement in thirty years, to judge by what usually comes out of Hollywood. The special effects are slicker, and the films may be in wide screen or 3-D, and surely they will be in color; but the characters and purposes of, say, *Fantastic Voyage* seem every bit as simple-minded as those of *FP-1 Does Not Answer* (in which the gadget is a floating airport in the middle of the Atlantic; because of course one knew, in 1933, that transatlantic air transport was desirable, but would never otherwise be possible because of the need of planes to stop every few hundred miles and refuel.)

Yet in the films that were on view this year in Trieste there were enough bits and pieces of brilliance to make it clear that the cinematographic techniques exist to produce some really first-rate science fiction. Some of the tricks are very simple: a puppeteer concealed inside a machine to make it seem to clutch

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# WANDERERS AND TRAVELLERS

by ARKADY STRUGATSKY



The water beneath the surface was not very cold, and yet I felt chilled. I had been sitting at the bottom of the lake under the steep bank for more than an hour, carefully turning my head from side to side and peering into the green-colored shadows. One had to sit very still because septopods are sensitive and mistrustful animals that can easily be frightened away by the slightest sound or abrupt movement, and then they would disappear and come back only at night — when it was better not to have anything to do with them.

An eel wriggled under my feet, and a pompous striped perch swam to and fro. Each time it passed, it stopped to stare at me with its round vacant eyes. When it left, a shoal of small silvery fish found a feeding-ground above my head. My shoulders and knees had become quite numb with cold, and I was beginning to worry lest Masha should get tired of waiting for me and dive into the water to my rescue. She would be waiting for me, sitting right at the edge of the water, worried and ready to start searching. I could picture her

so clearly that I had almost made up my mind to get out; it was then that a septopod appeared from behind some water plants only twenty paces away.

The septopod was rather a big specimen. It appeared all of a sudden, as noiselessly as a ghost, with its gray body thrusting forward. Its whitish mantle was throbbing in a soft, almost feeble manner, sucking in and throwing out water; and the septopod itself was slightly swaying from side to side as it went. Its arms, very much like the tattered ends of an old gray rag, were dragging behind it, while the narrow chink of its lusterless eye, half-covered by the eyelid, shone wanly in the dim light. It swam slowly, as they usually do in the daytime, as if it were in a trance. I had no idea where it was going, or why. No doubt it was prompted by some dark and primitive urge such as guides the movements of amoebae.

I raised my marking rifle slowly and aimed at the septopod's inflated back. The little silvery fishes rushed aside and disappeared. It seemed to

me that the eyelid covering the animal's eye moved. I pulled the trigger and immediately pushed off the ground to escape the caustic sepia. When I looked again, the septopod was nowhere to be seen, while a dense bluish-black inky fluid was dissolving in the water at the bottom of the lake. I surfaced and swam to the shore.

It was a hot fine day. A thin white mist hung over the lake, and the sky was clear and blue. A few gray clouds were building up behind the woods.

A stranger was sitting on the grass in front of our tent. He wore brightly colored bathing trunks and a band around his forehead. He was suntanned and gave the impression of a very strong man, as if there were not muscles but strong ropes beneath his skin. Standing in front of him, in a blue bathing suit, was my daughter. My long-legged Masha, with her hair hanging down over her thin shoulders.

No, she wasn't waiting wistfully by the water for her father as I had pictured. She was chattering away with this wiry stranger, gesticulating and evidently explaining something to him. For a moment I felt hurt that she took no notice of my reappearance.

But the stranger had noticed me. He turned his head quickly and studied me attentively, then smiled and waved his hand. Masha turned round and shouted joyfully: "Ah, here you are at last!"

I climbed out onto the grass, removed the diving mask and wiped my face. The stranger continued to

examine me with a smile on his face.

"How many have you marked?" asked Masha in a business-like manner.

"Only one," I answered, my jaws still stiff with cold.

"Bad luck," said Masha. She helped me to take off the aquastat, and I stretched out on the grass.

"Yesterday he marked two septopods," explained Masha, "and four the day before yesterday. If it goes on like that, we shall have to move on to another lake." She took a towel and began to rub me down. "You look like a frozen goose," she said laughingly. "And this is Leonid Andreevich Gorbovsky. He is an astro-archaeologist. Leonid Andreevich, meet my father, Stanislav Ivanovich."

Leonid Andreevich nodded.

"Feeling cold?" he asked. "It's nice here — green grass, sunshine."

"He'll soon be all right," said Masha, rubbing me with all her might. "He's generally a cheerful fellow; it's just that he gets so cold in the water . . ."

She must have been telling the man a lot of things about me and was now anxious to save my face. Let her, I thought. I had no time to trouble about it myself — I was busy trying to get warm again.

"Masha and I were rather worried about you down there," said Gorbovsky. "We even wanted to dive after you, only I don't know how. I suppose you can't imagine a man whose job has got nothing to do with diving and who has never dived in his life." He had been lying on his back and now turned on his side,

propping up his head with his hand. "I fly away tomorrow," he said confidentially. "God knows when I shall be lying by a lake again and if I shall ever have the chance of diving with an aquastat."

"Go ahead then, try," I offered.

He examined the aquastat carefully and touched it with his free hand.

"Sure," he said and rolled over onto his back. He put his hands under his head and lay there looking at me from beneath his thin eyelashes. There was something very prepossessing about him. I can't tell what exactly, but there it was. Maybe it was his eyes — so trusting and a little sad. Or maybe it was his ear that was sticking out from beneath the head-band in such a funny way. Having stared at me to his heart's content, he turned his gaze upon a blue dragonfly that was balancing on a blade of grass.

He addressed it gently: "Little dragonfly, aren't you a beauty! So blue . . . so transparent . . . sitting there quietly waiting for someone to gobble up." He stretched out his hand, but the dragonfly took off and flew over to the rushes. Gorbovsky followed it with his eyes, then lay back again on the grass.

"How complex everything is, my friends," he said meditatively, and Masha immediately sat down ready to listen, her eyes open wide. "Just take this dragonfly, for instance. So perfect, so graceful, and so content with everything! It gobbles up a fly, produces some offspring and then it is ready to die. Everything is simple, rational and elegant. No spiritual confusion, no love troubles, no self-

consciousness, no aim in life . . . ."

"It's only a machine," said Masha suddenly, "a dull cybernetic machine!"

Well, wasn't she a bright child after all? I almost burst out laughing, but managed to check myself in time — and only sniggered. Masha looked at me disapprovingly.

"Yes, it's dull," agreed Gorbovsky. "But just imagine, comrades, a giant dragonfly with a wing-span of about seven meters, colored a poisonous yellow-green with red stripes, and with foul black slime dripping from its jaws."

He raised his eyebrows and looked at us curiously. "Well, I see that you have got quite a clear mental picture of it. Though I was armed, I remember running away from them like mad . . . . Do you think they've got anything in common, these two dragonflies?"

"The green one is from another planet, I suppose," I asked.

"Yes, of course."

"From Pandora?"

"Exactly."

"You want to know what they've got in common?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's clear enough," I said.

"Their information-handling processes are at the same stage of development. A reaction ruled by instinct."

"Words," he sighs. "No offense meant, but those are just mere words. They don't help me in the least. My task is to find some traces of Reason in the universe, and I am still not clear myself as to what Reason is. I am continually being told about

different stages of information-handling processes. I know that this dragonfly and myself are at different stages, but I know it only by intuition. For instance, I find a termite mound. How am I to know whether it has been constructed by an intelligent mind or not? What am I to hunt for? Ruins? Inscriptions? Or rusty nails perhaps? What do I know of the traces these other creatures leave behind them? Suppose their sole aim in life is to destroy atmosphere wherever they encounter it . . . who knows? Or to build rings around the planets . . . or to hybridize life . . . or to create new life? For all I know, this dragonfly might be a cybernetic machine that had the power of self-reproduction built into it many years ago. I am not speaking now of the bearers of Reason themselves. One could pass a dozen times by some nasty slippery monster wallowing in the dirt without taking any notice of it, while the monster keeps staring at you all the time with its round yellow eyes — and thinking: How very interesting! It must be a new kind. I'll come back here some day with an expedition and try to catch one . . ."

He covered his eyes with his hand and started humming a tune. Masha sat staring at him and waiting for him to go on. I waited too and thought sympathetically how difficult it is to work on a problem that has not been clearly defined. To keep on wandering in the darkness, finding no pleasure in one's job. I've heard about these astro-archaeologists. No one takes them seriously.

"And yet there is Reason in the universe," Gorbovsky suddenly said. "There's no doubt about it. But it's quite different from what we expect it to be, and we just go on looking for it in the wrong place without having a definite idea of what we are looking for."

"That's true," I thought. "No definite idea, the wrong place . . . The whole thing is extremely childish. Trying to find traces of ideas that once floated in the air."

"Take, for instance, the Voice of Empty Space," he continued. "Have you ever heard about it? Probably not. Some fifty years ago they used to write a lot on the subject, but then they gave it up — couldn't discover anything. We've still got some 'scientists' who, owing to their own laziness or poor education, advocate a sort of cheap anthropocentrism. Somewhere they have picked up the idea that Man is omnipotent, and they cannot allow themselves to admit that he is unable to solve the problem of the Voice. So they think it is best to say that there isn't any Voice at all."

"But what is it, 'the Voice of Empty Space,'" asked Masha in a low voice.

"It's rather a curious phenomenon observed in some parts of the cosmos. If you set your on-board wireless for automatic tuning, sooner or later you will hear a calm, indifferent voice that keeps repeating one and the same sentence in an unknown tongue. For many years they've been picking it up, and many people have heard it, but they don't like to speak of it. It's not a very pleasant exper-

ience, you see. Imagine yourself on board a spaceship, alone on watch somewhere inconceivably far from Earth. The ether is free so there are no disturbances, only a faint rustling. And suddenly there is the Voice. Everyone else is asleep, and you are all alone in Space with it. It's really frightening, enough to make your flesh creep. Some recordings of the Voice have been made. Many scientists have tried to decipher it, and some still haven't given up, but to my mind they are just wasting their time. There are some other unsolved problems too, besides the Voice. Spacemen could tell you many an interesting story, but they don't like to blab —" He stopped and added with a sort of sad persistence: "It should be understood that it's no simple matter. We don't even know what to expect. We could meet them any moment, face to face. And, you know, they may turn out to be much superior to us. A great deal is said about various collisions and conflicts, about a different understanding of what is good and human, but that isn't what I fear. What I am afraid of is an unprecedented humiliation of mankind. If that were to happen, it would be a great emotional shock. We are used to being so proud of ourselves. We have created such a wonderful world, we know so much, we have broken out into the great universe which we are discovering and investigating as if it were something quite new, while for them the universe is their native home. They have been living there for millions of years just as we have on Earth, and they merely wonder about us:

"Where have these strange creatures arrived from?" "

He stopped abruptly and rose to his feet, listening to something. I started.

"It's thunder," said Masha quietly. She was staring at him open-mouthed. "It's thunder," she repeated, "we'll have a thunderstorm soon."

Still he kept listening, searching the sky attentively with his eyes.

"No, it isn't thunder," he said at last and sat down. "It's a liner. Can't you see it over there?"

A bright strip of light flashed through the dark clouds and disappeared. A faint noise of thunder was heard.

"Now I've got to sit here and wait," he said vaguely.

He looked at me pleasantly and there was sadness and tense expectation in his eyes. Then it all disappeared, he relaxed, and his eyes had the same trusting look in them again.

"And what are you working on, Stanislav Ivanovich?" he asked.

I realized that he wanted to change the subject and began telling him about the septopods. I told him that these animals belong to the dibranchia subclass in the cephalopod molluscs group and represent a special and previously unknown tribe of the octopus order. They have the following distinctive features: a reduced third left arm conjugate to the third right hectocodyledonal arm, three rows of suckers on each arm, an extremely powerful venous heart and no coelom whatsoever. I explained that they also have a highly developed and concentrated nervous system that distinguishes the septopods

from all other representatives of the cephalopod group. There are some additional minor peculiarities not worth mentioning. The septopods were discovered quite recently when some individuals appeared on the east and southeast coast of Asia. A year later they were found in the lower reaches of the Mekong, the Yangtze, the Hwang Ho and the Amur, and in some small lakes situated at a considerable distance from the coast, as, for instance, in this lake. This is very striking, because cephalopods cannot live without salt, and therefore they even tend to avoid arctic waters with their low salinity. And they almost never come out onto dry land. But septopods feel quite at home in fresh-water bodies such as this lake and are not afraid to come out on to the banks. They get into boats and climb on to bridges, and quite recently two of them were found in a wood some thirty kilometers from here.

Masha wasn't listening. She had heard it all a dozen times before. She went to the tent and came back carrying our radio. She switched on the automatic tuner and was evidently trying to pick up the Voice.

Gorbovsky, however, was particularly interested.

"And were those two specimens alive?" he asked.

"No, they were found dead. You see, this is a forest reserve, and the septopods had been trampled and half-eaten by wild boars. But they had been alive thirty kilometers away from the lake. Their mantle cavity was full of wet water plants. Probably the septopods preserve

water for their land marches in this way. They must have been moving inland from these lakes in a southerly direction. It should be noted that all the captured individuals have been adult males. Not a single female or young one. Probably they can neither live in fresh water nor come out on land.

"All this is extremely interesting," I went on, "for as a rule sea-animals only change their mode of life as sharply as this during the period of reproduction. Then their propagation instinct urges them to move to unknown places. But with septopods this is absolutely out of the question. They are guided by some other instinct, more ancient and powerful. We are mainly concerned now with the problem of their migrations.

"That's why I keep sitting in this lake for ten hours a day. Today I marked one. If I am lucky, I shall mark a couple more before it gets dark. At night they become very aggressive and attack anything that tries to approach them, even humans. But that's only at night.

Masha had now turned the wireless up to its full capacity and was enjoying the din.

"Turn it down a little, Masha," I asked.

She complied.

"So you mark them," said Gorbovsky. "How odd! And with what, may I ask?"

"With supersonic generators," I said pulling the magazine out of the marking rifle and handing him an ampule. "We mark them with these bullets. Inside the bullets there is a generator that can be heard in the

water at a distance of some twenty or thirty kilometers."

He took the ampule and examined it carefully. His face turned old and sad.

"Clever," he muttered. "Very clever, and so simple."

He went on turning it round in his fingers, then put it on the grass in front of me and got to his feet. He walked slowly and uncertainly over to his clothes, picked up his trousers and then stood still, holding them absently in his hands.

I watched him with some anxiety. Masha was holding the marking gun eager to explain how it worked, and she was watching Gorbovsky too, the corners of her mouth drooping mournfully. She is a sensitive child, and I have noticed several times that her face is apt to adopt the same expression as that of someone she is watching.

Then, speaking in a low voice filled with irony, Gorbovsky said:

"It's really quite funny, to tell the truth. Such a close analogy! For centuries they used to sit in the depths and now they have risen to the surface and come out into an unknown and hostile world. What urges them on? An ancient dark instinct, you say? Or a method of handling information that has reached the stage of extreme curiosity? It certainly would have been better for the creatures to stay at home in the salty water, but something induces them to venture onto dry land."

He roused himself and started pulling on his long old-fashioned trousers, hopping awkwardly on one leg.

"Tell me, Stanislav Ivanovich,

these septopods are not just primitive cephalopods, are they?"

"Certainly not," I answered.

But he wasn't listening. He had turned towards the wireless and was staring at it. Powerful but somewhat disharmonious signals, like the disturbances caused by an X-ray installation, were coming from it. Masha put down the marking rifle.

"6:08," she said, looking perplexed. "It must be a service station."

Gorbovsky listened to the signals with closed eyes and with his head inclined a little to one side.

"No," he said at last, "it's not a service station. It's me."

"What?"

"Yes, it's me who is signalling, me, Leonid Andreevich Gorbovsky."

"What for?"

He laughed a little. It was a sad laugh.

"Ask me another," he said. "I should like to know that myself." He pulled on his shirt. "Why, on returning from their regular cruise number EN 101 - EN 2657, have three pilots and their spaceship become the source of radio waves with a length of 6.083 meters?"

We remained silent. He stopped for a moment and bent down to buckle his sandals.

"We have been examined by doctors. We have been examined by physicists." He rose and brushed the sand and pieces of grass from his trousers. "And they all came to the conclusion that it was impossible. One could have laughed oneself into a fit at their puzzled faces. But as for us, we were really past laughing. Tolya Obozov refused to take his

holiday and went to Pandora. He said he preferred to emit signals as far from Earth as possible. Valkenstein went to work at a submarine station. Only I remained here, wandering around and signalling. And all the time I expect something to happen. I don't know exactly what, but it frightens me. I am full of anticipation and fear at one and the same time. Do you follow me?"

"I don't know," I said dubiously, and looked at Masha out of the corner of my eye.

"You are right," he said catching the hint. He took the wireless out of Masha's hands and raised it to his ear, "Nobody knows. It's been going on for a month now without interruption, and the signals don't seem to get any weaker. Wha . . . whee . . . wha . . . whee — like that, day and night. No matter whether we are happy or sad, hungry or well fed, or working or just loafing about. Wha . . . whee . . . all the time. *Tariel* is emitting less, however. *Tariel* is my spaceship. It has been laid up for the present. Just to be on the safe side. Its signals are jamming some control signals directed to Venus, and this annoys the operators over there; they keep sending inquiries. Tomorrow I shall take it away somewhere farther away." He drew himself to his feet and slapped his sides with his hands. "Well, it's time I was going. Good-by! I wish you luck. Good-by Masha! Don't start racking your young brains over what I've been saying. It's much too complicated for you."

He waved his hand, nodded and walked away. He looked very long-

legged and awkward. When he was passing our tent he stopped for a moment and said:

"You should be more considerate with those septopods, you know. This marking of yours might be the cause of some serious trouble for the creatures."

He left. I lay in the grass on my stomach for a while, then looked at Masha. She was following Gorbovsky with her eyes. It was clear that Leonid Andreevich had produced a deep impression on her. But not on me. I wasn't in the least troubled by his considerations about the bearers of Universal Reason being much superior to us. Let them be. To my mind the more superior they proved to be, the less chances there were of our getting in their way. We would be like the small fry that easily swim through the large meshes of a fishing net. As to pride, humiliation, emotional shock . . . probably we would get over that, somehow. I am sure I would. The fact that we are discovering and studying a universe which has long been known and inhibited by them makes no difference. We haven't made ourselves at home there yet! They are still only a part of nature for us to discover and investigate, no matter how superior to us they might be. They are outsiders, and that's that.

Although, let's face it, if I were to be marked the way I mark the septopods . . .

I looked at my watch and sat up. It was time to get down to work again. I copied down the number of the last ampule, checked the aquastat, then went over to the tent



where I picked up the supersonic locator and put it into the pocket of my bathing trunks.

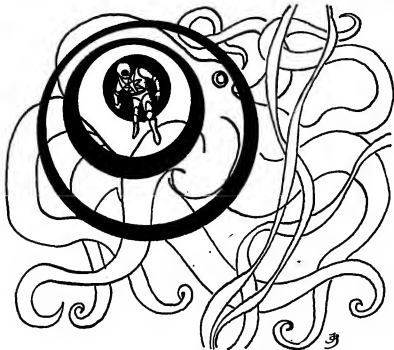
"Give me a hand, Masha," I said, and started pulling on the aquastat.

Masha was still sitting in front of the wireless and listening to the unfading "wha . . . whee . . ." She came over and helped me with the

the wet hair from her forehead and said:

"Still, there must be a difference between a spaceship and a slippery bag of wet seaweed."

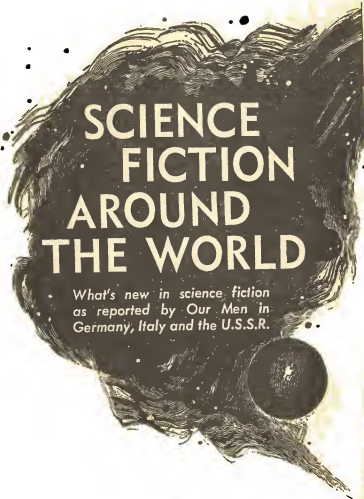
I told her to wait on shore and submerged. No, if I were Gorbovsky, I shouldn't be so nervous. It is **not** to be taken seriously, and the same



aquastat, and we both stepped into the water. I switched on the locator under the water. The signals started sounding — my marked septopods were wandering dreamily about the lake. I exchanged a significant look with Masha and launched out. Masha spat out some water, brushed back

with all that astro-archaeological nonsense of his. Traces of ideas . . . emotional shock . . . there won't be any shock. Most likely we won't even notice one another's existence. What do they care about us, after all?

END



# SCIENCE FICTION AROUND THE WORLD

*What's new in science fiction  
as reported by Our Men in  
Germany, Italy and the U.S.S.R.*



∞

## GERMANY

by Walter Ernsting

**I**t is very good news that Frederik Pohl will edit a new science-fiction magazine, but the best is that it will be an international sf magazine. That means, if I am not mistaken, American readers will get to know sf writers from all over the world — including Germany.

You can believe me, we have a lot of sf over here. More than you can imagine, if you include the transla-

tions of Anglo-American writers well known to you.

But I want to tell you about the writers of Germany.

Surely you know the old film *Metropolis*, from the book by Thea von Harbou some 30 years ago. In Germany she is forgotten by now; so is Hans Dominik. He is only known by the older generation. After the second world war a new kind of

sf became popular: modern science fiction as you know it in America and England. This is the reason why the pioneers have been nearly forgotten.

These new authors started to write about 1954, but most of them never became really well known. Only two or three of them made themselves a name and are still in business. Others came later in the sixties and developed their own styles of sf.

With six books, Dr. Herbert Franke is one of the best German writers because of his fantastic ideas and good style. In my opinion he is as good as any average American writer. He twice or thrice got the prize for the best German sf novel of the year.

Clark Darlton looks like an American name but it is my own pen name, once chosen by a German publisher. I started in 1954, and I am still writing. Since this time I have written and published more than a hundred novels and last year got my fifth "German Hugo", named for Hugo Gernsback for the best German sf novel of the year. A lot of my books have been published in various countries, but never in America or England. On the other hand, I translated more than three hundred American or English titles into German.

In 1961 some writers put their heads together, and three months later the most famous serial of the world was born: *Perry Rhodan*, with an edition of 200,000 copies weekly. Just now number 300 is on the newsstands. In a few months the first German sf film in color and cinema-

scope will be shown, made from the first three novels of *Perry Rhodan*.

New writers became known by this serial. Names like Hanns Kneifel and Heinz Ewers are very popular today; both write good sf with action and a bit of philosophy. And don't let me forget that young man named Robert Artner, who wrote a book together with me — as I wrote novels in collaboration with Jack Williamson, Raymond Z. Gallun and Jesco von Puttkamer.

Science fiction has its boom in Germany now. The Moewig-Verlag in Munich presents twenty titles every month; it is really the biggest sf publisher in the world. The agency Panorama in Vienna is the agent for most of the German authors.

Most German sf is space opera of a brilliant type. It may seem funny to you that most of the heroes in German sf novels have American names. But I think it is quite natural, since America is sending up astronauts and not Germany — not directly at least. So there are American space pilots traveling to the stars, in German sf, and not Meiers, Schmidts or Mullers.

But you can also find a great deal of sociological sf over here. Novels and short stories. Hard stories with a bang, you could call them.

Some sf comes from behind the Iron Curtain, but till now I have only found one writer worth mentioning: Carlos Rasch with four novels, one called *The Blue Planet*. It's set some years before the birth of Jesus Christ — and believe me, it's real sf.

Thirteen years ago I founded German Fandom, and today we have got

a lot of smaller clubs and still more fanzines. The biggest club is the old SFCG (Science Fiction Club Germany) with connections in all countries and members there too.

At the World Convention last year America had a German TAFF winner. Thomas Schluck, a well known fan and translator. Thomas Schluck is also my co-editor of the German edition of *Galaxy*, and I am sure one day he'll be a writer too.

Fandom here is well organized and has contacts with British and

American Fandom. We have meetings every year; in the spring at Marquartstein-Castle in Bavaria, and in autumn the big German Cons in Vienna, Frankfurt or, like this year, in Berlin.

Things are looking pretty nice for us. And we are very glad to catch up with you. We are no longer twenty or thirty years behind. Perhaps *International Science Fiction* gives you the opportunity to find out for yourself!

END

## THE SOVIET UNION

by Julius Kagarlitsky

(Translated by Anne McCaffrey & Irina Poutiatine)

Once, in a writers' club, I was introduced to the guest of one of my friends. The guest was the chairman of a Science Fiction Fan Club.

"Kagarlitsky?" repeated the chairman. "Of course, of course. I have heard you are going to write a book, *What Is Science Fiction?* Interesting, very interesting. But, understand, I know all about it. I'm actually a physicist."

Now that was remarkable! I specially hoped to find a man who could facilitate my job. And, though he denied that he could collaborate immediately, he didn't rob me of hope for the future. Some way, some time, said he. Under soberer conditions.

Two months later, we met again by chance. With regret under soberer conditions, he was not talkative.

Still later, I read his short article

on the subject. He did *not* know what science fiction is.

So crashed my last hope of finding out about it from someone else. What concerns me and my friends is that we are all too well aware of each other's opinions. And we continue to argue.

For several reasons. Here is the first of them.

Science fiction is always changing. Our requirements of it change. What we would read with pleasure as a classic does not produce any enjoyment when it is given to us as a work meant to satisfy our needs nowadays. Naturally some of us keep pace with current literature, while others lag behind; more so because this process itself is very complex and dynamic.

A new period in Soviet history of

sf clearly begins later than the corresponding period in American sf history. In the United States this began, as far as I know, in the years 1940-1945: for us, in 1956-1957. And though in Russia the majority of active sf writers read English and are not badly read in American fantasy, I would not say that the Soviet efforts are derived from or show the influence of American fiction. These days, when we have an abundance of translations of American sf writers (in the beginning we had nothing), the Russian reading public can determine this influence by themselves. Sometimes the public may indeed scold us, but for reasons other than that we imitate Americans.

The influence of American sf shows up elsewhere. We developed rapidly, and the experience accumulated by the American sf writers in interpreting the many complicated problems of today's world scientific revolution was unquestionably a great help to us.

Indeed, we were compelled to turn our interest to science fiction writing by the very events in our own lives — the launching of Yuri Gagarin — the many beneficial changes in the life of Soviet society — the rapid, avalanche-like growth in the tempo of research in the areas of cybernetics, bionics and the like.

The beginning was stormy, optimistic, but it was not easy to foretell the results of the development. Those who were beginners ten years ago are masters now. And now they write about far different subjects than they did in the beginning of their creative careers.

The young writers in the late 50's overwhelmingly desired to tell what Science is going to give the world, how the machines will perform menial work and how the last microbe is confined in prison. They were in such a hurry (and sometimes also inexperienced as writers) that they would forget many things, including the social and purely human problems which face a developing society. Their fantasies were usually of the Jules Verne school of fiction: in other words, they were attracted by the idea of technological fantasy; and in one sense, they differed from the works of many writers in the 30's because the scientific starting point of this new technical fantasy was borrowed from the achievements of up-to-date physics.

Now, however, Soviet sf is being judged solely as science-fiction literature which is devoting itself, above all else, to the questions of the social and psychological consequences of scientific and technical progress. A very noticeable role in this turn from technical fantasy-literature to the social genre was played by the novel of Ivan Efremov, *Andromeda*. The turn was very decisive.

In the last years especially, two writing teams stood out — Mikhail Emtsov and E. Parnov, and Arcady and Boris Strugatsky. A writer who does not work alone, but teams up with someone else, is sometimes called "a half-way writer," but each one of the above is, in my opinion, an accomplished writer.

The best story, written by Mikhail Emtsov and E. Parnov, appears to me to be the novel *Soul of the*

World, about an artificially cultured organic matter, "biotoza," which turned into a peculiar "super-brain," conquering the minds and souls of people. I remember I took exception with the authors, but altogether it is an astonishingly clever novel about the role of a human personality in social development.

Very quickly did the Strugatsky team develop — from the first unsuccessful novel and rather ordinary tales to philosophical fantasy of a very high level. At the same time, the Strugatskys demonstrated in their lesser works their wonderful command of words. They write most extraordinarily, occasionally stunningly — and quickly they captivate their readers. A vast success was made in the novel *Difficult to be God*, a paradoxical and convincing union of the historical and futuristic novel. *Difficult to be God* is a gloomy novel. It is written about the Middle Ages and fascism, full of thoughts on the difficult ways in which human history moves. And right thereafter, they published another very funny book, *Monday Starts Saturday*, about the Scientific Research Institute for Witchcraft and Enchantment. A little later on, after a short interval, another novel appeared, *The Predatory Things of the Century*, a book that is like a fantastic detective story. It is a novel of the destruction of a material progress which is not supported by ethical or moral progress.

These and similar works indicate a tendency to find the widest relationship between things in an effort to grasp the laws of the universe in

total. From these positions, the authors usually judge different kinds of events; sometimes, the most commonplace ones.

If I am stopping here, instead of continuing to inundate the American reader with titles and names, it's not because of laziness. In America, many short stories are written; we write very few. Most of our science-fiction writers lean toward the novel and the novelette. If they do write short stories, they do not show up to the best of their abilities or talents. Yes, and as far as the number of sf writers, we are probably lagging behind the U.S.A. there as well. These are some of the differences between the U.S.A. and the Soviet.

Still, although there are few of us, we represent a wide variety of talents. There are those who developed as writers in the 30's Others (there are more of these) started writing later, developing under the influence of other conditions; but, as it is easy to understand, this does not guarantee the identical perception of the world or complete unity of opinion.

Among us there are very few who have received a Humanities education. Two names, only, come to my mind: Ariadne Gromova, a candidate for a Ph.D. in philosophy, and Arkady Strugatsky, who started his literary career as a Japanese translator. He still translates but now only fantasy. It's very possible there are others, but probably very few.

Other writers are drawn from different branches of science, like Ivan Efremov, the well known anthropologist. But Strugatsky, until recently,

worked as a programmer at the Pulkovskoi Observatory. Eremy Parnov has his Ph.D. in chemistry.

And we even live in different ways. Some of us have left our professions while others continue at them. A material consideration plays a role in this but not always the most important one. A second profession, sometimes, attracts no less than literature.

A propos of the material side of the business. When the sf writers write about the dangers of Utopia, it doesn't necessarily stem from their own experience; but, in any case, the situation of the sf writer in no way differs from the position of any other writer. For fantasy, you get paid as much as any other usual prose. Since there are no literary agents, the fees, after income tax is withheld, are given entirely to the author. An accepted author has a quite pleasant standard of living. For this reason the writer doesn't (in order to earn a living) have to write anything else except science fiction. Lately more writers who never wrote fantasy have been turning to it. For instance, the novel of A. Sharov, *After Rewriting*, a very good example of satirical writing, was well received.

Unfortunately we do not have a special magazine dedicated to fantasy. This is compensated to a certain extent by the fact that several popular science magazines regularly, from issue to issue, publish fantasy novels and stories. The circulation of the two biggest magazines reaches several hundred thousand. Besides

them, two anthologies are published: one, four times a year, and the other, once a year — with excellent sales.

But, most important of all, a greater number of publishing houses try to put out science fiction now. The public demand for this genre has grown. Two publishers have special departments for fantasy. One of them, *Mir*, publishes nothing but contemporary translations of fantasy from other parts of the world. In this past year, *Mir* has published a two-volume anthology of Anglo-American fantasy (I'm afraid, not very well done — but it still sold out immediately) including *Wind of Time* by Chad Oliver, *Space Merchants* by Pohl and Kornbluth, a large anthology of Isaac Asimov, an anthology of Robert Sheckley and some other books.

Another — *The Young Guards* — is now in the process of publishing fifteen volumes. *A Library of Contemporary Fantasy* (very cheap and very well done) which consists of works of Soviet and foreign authors. In the volumes already out are the works of Ivan Efremov, Ray Bradbury, the Japanese Abe Kobo, the Polish writer Stanislaus Lem (he is well known among us but, I hear, less known in the U.S.A.) and several other Italian, French, Polish and Japanese authors. We just gave a volume of John Wyndham to the printers.

I hope, in the near future, we will become better acquainted — with the help of these different publishers — with the work of such American writers as Simak, Knight and Kuttner.



**The Children's Literature** also publishes sf, mainly classics. The firm **Knowledge** was the first to bring out a collection of Bradbury and Asimov. And also fantasy is being brought out by different firms all over the territory of the USSR. Some of them publish fantasy in the languages of the people of the different Soviets. Sometimes it is translated from Russian; sometimes it is originally written in the language of the Republic: Ukrainian, White Russian, Moldavian, Azerbaijani, Georgian and Estonian. In the Writers' Union of Azerbaijan, there is even a section where those who write fantasy in Baku, Azerbaijani and Russians get together.

A similar section exists in the Leningrad Department of the Writers' Union RSFSR (Russian Federation). Lately we have founded a working group of sf writers in the Moscow Department, and we aim to found an all-union federation of science-fiction writers. It is hard to tell if it will bring anything new to the organization. But, in any case, after such a confederation, we will know each other better. And, also, our comrades will see our problems better. Although the fantasy writers cannot always explain what is fantasy, they can sometimes explain what it cannot be: and what cannot be expected from it. (For example, accurate prophecy.) In my opinion, this problem is common to both Soviet and American writers.

What role does criticism play in disseminating the comprehension of the nature of fantasy? Our

situation is much like the American in many ways.

Because of the explosion of interest in fantasy, sometimes ill-qualified people gave opinions. For that reason, criticisms of fantasy are now done by fantasy writers. Their involvement helped raise the general level of the criticism of fantasy, and, I'm sure, it will continue to grow. I am positive that we cannot do without the involvement of professional critics . . . educated in the general literary processes and, at the same time, well oriented in the region of contemporary scientific thought and the field of science fiction itself. The fantasy writers, all over the world, want to be accepted as members of the literary profession, but in their own *genre*. A goal to be strived for and, here in Russia, we have achieved some of that ambition.

About a year ago, a very interesting issue of the magazine *Literary Questions* was dedicated to the relation of science and literature and partially to the question of science fiction. This winter, a large symposium on the same theme took place in Leningrad. The first issue of the magazine *Foreign Literature for 1967* will be devoted wholly to foreign sf and criticism thereof. Both the anthologies mentioned previously will try to include articles on the question of history and theory of sf. Most of the translated books and part of the original books are printed with generalizing introductions.

In the next three or four years, we can probably anticipate the appearance of several critical books.

I'm sure that the number of critics professionally interested in fantasy will grow. In any case, more and more of my critic friends, who, before this, were astonished by my interest in science-fiction (those who really liked me were hurt by this interest and pitied me for my aberration) are now becoming interested in the *genre* themselves.

For that reason, several years from now, I'm afraid I would be physically unable to show you a complete list of the critics interested in fantasy. Right now I can do it easily.

The oldest of us is Kyrill Andreyev, the author of a well known book about Jules Verne. The youngest of us is Rafael Nudelman, who continues to work as an instructor of mathematics. The middle generation is represented by Brandis and Dmitrievsky, whose opinions and interest are well known to many American sf writers. I cannot say that we are always in agreement, but the publishers show a commendable impartiality: thus it's up to the reader to decide who is right or wrong among us.

In general, why do sf writers like to argue?

I do not think it consists of mere professional disagreement or a personality difference between the arguers. It is because science fiction deals with the deep problems of humanity as a whole. Science is developing with such speed that the future, with its possibilities and perils, is quickly becoming the present. If the theme for sf before was "the future as it is interesting and educational to imagine it," now its theme must be "the future in which we shall be living." When one speaks of such a future, arguments become heated.

The best way we — all of us in the world — can serve this future is not by the cessation of arguments which increase knowledge. This goes for both American and Soviet writers. We perceive better the global scope of things than most people and we are read by millions of readers. Let us help them understand their "humanity" and feel their responsibility to it. We will do our good deed.

END

## ITALY

by Luigi Cozzi

In April 1952, science-fiction literature made its first official appearance in Italy as the initial issue of the magazine *Scienza Fantastica* hit all the newsstands. Too bad *Scienza Fantastica* was scrapped after only seven issues, though since October of the same year another magazine

featuring novels on a bi-weekly schedule, named *Urania*, was started by the greatest Italian publishing house, Mondadori, and launched the term *fantascienza* (a mixture of fantasy and science) as translation of the American "science fiction."

By entering the field late, in

1952, the Italians avoided the long, long trip to maturity that American science fictioners had to work out through the decades after their start in 1926. Our editors could select the very best and the most interesting novels and stories from the American science-fiction Golden Age and Early Fifties.

As a matter of fact, the early issues of *Scienza Fantastica* and *Urania* featured such stories as *Rescue Party* by Arthur C. Clarke and *Farewell to the Master* by Harry Bates (which the good movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was adapted from), and such novels as *Gunner Cade* by C. M. Kornbluth and Judith Merril, *The Day of the Trifids* by John Wyndham, *Slan* by A. E. Van Vogt and *Sinister Barrier* by Eric Frank Russell. It happened that Italian readers liked science fiction very much, and *Urania* soon reached an average sale of 50,000 copies each issue.

Disappointingly, following so good a start, the first Italian editors began leaning heavily on novels by French and German low-grade writers. They also lined up next to *City* by Clifford D. Simak, *The Puppet Masters* by Robert A. Heinlein and *The Dreaming Jewels* by Theodore Sturgeon (all of them getting high ratings from the readers) such novels as *The Space Hawk* by Anthony Gilmore, *The Infinite Atom* by John W. Campbell and *The Green Man of Graypeck* by Festus Pragnell and several works by Vargo Statten translated from French — all of them quite interesting; but one can't read them along with the latest Simak

and Heinlein without seeing a considerable difference. Furthermore, the Italian science-fiction magazine editors "forgot" such American milestones as *The Space Merchants* by F. Pohl & C. M. Kornbluth, *Final Blackout* by L. Ron Hubbard, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter M. Miller, *Gather Darkness* by Fritz Leiber, *Hell's Pavement* by Damon Knight, *Player Piano* by Kurt Vonnegut, *The Demolished Man* by Alfred Bester and *Takeoff* by C. M. Kornbluth — all remained untranslated till a couple of years ago. Even more startling, both *Messiah* by Gore Vidal and *Limbo* by Bernard Wolfe are still unpublished.

As a result, during the whole Fifties Italy had several new science-fiction magazines, some outstanding anthologies, a few nicely done movies — but readers were drifting away. Up to this date *Urania* still sells the best, though its average printing ranks about 20,000 copies an issue. However the sales of science-fiction hardcovers are going higher and higher.

During the Fifties and the very early Sixties, Italian readers didn't get any sort of serious critical work on the magazine field, the very first attempt at it being credited to Mrs. Roberta Rambelli. Though today she is somewhat ashamed of these initial efforts (she made quite a stir writing that C. L. Moore is a pen name for Katherine MacLean and that the *Foundation* series is a feeble juvenile work by Asimov), she does really deserve a lot of praise for them. Alas, a very few editors followed her way, the only other attempt at

criticism being *La Fantascienza* by a Lino Aldani, a very poor and inept book-length essay aimed mostly to youngsters. Even today it seems that none here in Italy is trying to create a serious adult scholarly work on the genre as some did in the United States and in England. Only the new magazine *Gamma*, edited by a couple of Milan fans, is currently featuring articles and essays, mostly from foreign contributors and from the British *SF Horizons*. Even the rising Italian fandom does not seem to have borne a kind of serious and deep criticism, since most of the several fanzines feature stories rather than essays.

This way of things hasn't helped at all the raising of a kind of original science fiction made by Italian writers. You must consider that the Italians mean by "magazine" what the Americans usually call a "pocket-book." All Italian science-fiction "magazines" are pocketbooks featuring the cover novel, a serial (which is a short novel shared into an unbearable ten or fifteen parts) and some advertising and comics. Sometimes there is a correspondence feature, often there's not. Because of this, Italian writers have had a very small opportunity at trying their hands at writing science fiction.

Till the early Sixties the only constant source of Italian novels has been *Cosmo*, a magazine leaning mostly on second-rate novels by French and low-grade British writers, among which occasionally there may be some rare outstanding American novel such as *Gladiator-at-Law* by F. Pohl & C. M. Kornbluth and

*Time Is the Simplest Thing* by Clifford D. Simak, though both these latter have been issued in horrible translations abridged to about half of the book. Among this chaos of few excellent and several trash titles you can find some novels by Italian writers, all of them hiding under the cloak of an American pen name. Too bad; almost the whole of these novels are low-grade (one of the latest is simply titled *Frankenstein from Space* — help!), and the valiant writers who tried their hands with *Cosmo* went on to start different jobs: Roberta Rambelli began editing a magazine of her own; Gianfranco Briatore and Marco Pagni gave up writing science fiction; Ernest Gattaldi, who has also published a short short piece on *F&SF*, went to Rome and wrote screenplays for the Italian horror movies *Werewolf in a Girl's Dormitory*, *Terror in the Crypt*, *lunghe capelli della morte*, *The Ghost*, *The Horrible Dr. Hichcock* and on, while the most popular Italian science-fiction writer, Luigi Navaglio, has just ceased writing for *Cosmo*.

Because of this situation, there wasn't a good time for the Italian science-fiction writers till late 1962. During the years from 1958 to 1962 the lone sources for publishing Italian-made stories were *Futuro*, a magazine which lasted a very few issues and *Oltre il Cielo*, a kind of very poor man's *Science and Invention* cursed by an erratic circulation and schedule. Anyway, while the writers of this early stage of Italian science fiction have mostly disappeared, a few young and new ones, grown up

with the genre itself, have started writing in an unusual and exciting pattern.

Comparing the writings of these new waves of Italian science fiction, we can see how deeply different they are from most American and British writers. Italian writers don't like to deal with the *gadget story* that so many (and good) American authors are used to working with. The reason is that these older Italian writers own a deeply *classical* culture; their knowledge of science doesn't exist to just a few basic laws learned during their youthful days at high school and by now long-forgotten, while the younger ones are just making their own literary background reading science fiction and listening to Bob Dylan.

All Italian writers like best two themes: the man and his society. You find people dealing with other subjects, of course, and I can remember some fast-paced novels by Luigi Naviglio and one good adventure story, *A Night 26 Hours Long*, by Renato Pestriero, which the good movie *Planet of the Vampires* has been made from. But that isn't enough to say that Italians are good

for the adventure trend. Some of them *can* do it.

Fantasy? The genre "fantasy," as very well known in the United States, is unknown and unliked in Italy. When an Italian says "fantasy" (or *fantasia*, as they call it), he means imagination, freedom, thought-provoking ideas. For them science fiction is between the fantasy and the things of our real worlds, both of science and society. Borrowing a definition from Lester del Rey, who reported it in *If*, May, 1966, the Italians mean by science fiction a mirror to possibility, with a single subtle difference from the similar American writings: the Italian writers deal with an *impossible* world of if though based upon a social-human fact of our time, while the Americans mostly deal with a future *possible* world based upon the same social-human fact.

Don't let me be misunderstood, Italy isn't at all the Happy Land of a science-fiction reader. The good Italian science-fiction writers are rather few. You heard of this Sturgeon's Law, which says that the 90% of everything is trash?

As a matter of fact, it fits very well the Italian science-fiction writers. END





# THE EPSILON PROBLEM

by Helmuth W. Mommers and Ernest Vleck

Translated by Harry Warner, Jr.

## I

The star chart before which General Mayhoun stood occupied an entire wall. Its indirect illumination also formed the only source of light in the tiny auditorium. Although the air conditioning, humming with overexertion, did its utmost, the humid heat was oppressive.

The general, a skinny veteran, underlined his explanations with a long steel pointer, thrusting it from time to time into the three-dimensional mass of stars with typically military gestures.

The eight intelligence agents followed attentively and grimly each of his words, all of his motions. They were learning of their task and of the matters that depended on it. Among them, Captain Lokart held the heaviest burden of responsibility, and he realized it.

"That's it, men. You know what you must do," the general concluded. "Do your duty in this manner

— and I wish you good luck. Eight chairs were shoved back as the men arose to move toward the door.

"Captain Lokart," the general called.

The man to whom he spoke turned his head.

"Sir?"

"Just a minute."

The other agents had left the room.

"Come over here."

Lokart went to the general.

"I have a special request for you. All trace of authority had vanished from Mayhoun's voice. Now he spoke quietly, urgently, as well as understandingly. "Handle old Fyr with velvet gloves. That isn't a command. Just a request."

"Of course, sir."

The general put his hand on Lokart's shoulder.

"These are the last eight bars. Bring Fyr along mercifully to understand that his mission is ended."

Lokart nodded with bowed head. "Try to make him understand how much good it will do the children."

More nodding. Then, after a moment's silence:

"All right. That's it, Captain."

At the door, Lokart turned once again. He smiled — confidently, he hoped. He appeared proper on the outside; within himself, he was not so sure.

He strode straight down to the transmitter room of the headquarters. Everything was already prepared. The special messenger awaited him with the authorizing documents; the technicians had tested for the last time the mechanism of the transit-brain.

His throat was dry, as if dehydrated, as he walked through the symmetrical light-patterns of the transmitter-field.

The Morph-children had waited a long while in deep concentration, stretched out flat, almost a part of the barren ground. Now there came from their leader the attack signal: thrice-repeated, a whistle in the ultrasonic, imperceptible to human ears.

Their bodies awoke to sudden life. Digging sharp claws into the clefts of the rocks, they formed a defensive chain, tensed their leg muscles and leaped.

Lightning flashed from the cloud-covered violet sky, bathing the strange, uneven landscape in a phantom light. Colors flashed for seconds over the wing surfaces of the Morph-children; then they soared like

ghosts from the engulfing darkness. Among the light fluttering and whispering of their flight crashed, with primeval force, the thunder, followed almost at once by an ominous downpour.

Thirteen spheres glowed, as the Morph-children manipulated their engines and activated their protective screens. Abruptly up they went, their wings wailing in their wake. Then they had reached their zenith. For a moment they hung motionlessly in the sky, thirteen evilly gleaming bright specks. But only for a moment.

In the very next instant, with a crackling vibration of their sails, they hurtled downward, their sharp heads held low, and landed, suddenly breaking their dive, with a single mighty flap of their wailing wings. Hardly landed, they thrust out again their hind legs and continued their course in long, uninterrupted leaps.

It was not long until the outline of a city was traced on their antennae.

They must go there. Their duty was to destroy this city, to annihilate another strongpoint of the enemy. After that, they must return to Father Epsilon — to Father Epsilon, whom they loved as much as they hated the Spoot.

They were already close to the city when their approach was noticed. Already they could see the dim lights with the naked eye, the dark silhouettes of the towers, battlements and walls. Then the first vibration of opposition arrived, dead-ly, terrifying in its silence.

The Morph-children instantly hunted firm ground, squeezed into clefts in the rocks, pressed against the ice-cold ground, crouched behind rock fragments. Seconds later — the echo of the vibrations a lament on the wind — they swarmed out, as if following a command. They pushed their claws into the frightful face of this world and went forward, always forward, in defiance of the attacking Spoot.

From the city, detection vibrations came.

The Spoot bodies of the thirteen children crouched again. They increased the intensity of their protective screens. Operating the engines with their forelegs, they thrust their sharp heads between the fleshy folds of their necks.

They were but thirteen in number and battled against an entire city. But Father Epsilon had taught them good tactics and had provided them with annihilating weapons.

A shrill command — and claws raised the mechanism, tore at switches, pressed keys.

The city lay silent and peaceful for a moment, as if sleeping. Then with sudden, fierce power, mighty explosions shook the ground, and the crashing of rocks rose to a tortured scream of death.

The protective screens of the thirteen Morph-children flickered; the pins of the engines danced as if mad. And as the city transformed itself into a witches' kettle of energies; the screams of death weakened gradually — and yielded to a complete silence.

The rain that poured down a sec-

ond later wiped out the last remnants of the city. Nothing but a thick, wetly gleaming mudhole told of its defeat.

The battle had come to an abrupt halt; the Morph-children had another victory to record. Their hatred of the Spoot and their love for Father Epsilon had united them. Now they could go back, completely satisfied.

A little wearied by their efforts, they set forth to the distant transmitters. Last week their return trip had not taken so much time. And a couple of months ago, they had needed only to step from the matter transmitter to stand before a Spoot city.

Silently they returned. But despite their fatigue their eyes glowed brightly.

They reached the thirteen transmitters without incident. Once in the compartment, they completed their physical transformation. They reassumed their normal human figures.

So far, so good. They stepped from the matter transmitter as the sons of men, set foot on their native world. When they breathed in the familiar air, they knew at once that something unusual had occurred.

In truth, they could see Father Epsilon, who awaited their return in his customary calm anticipation — but they also noticed the other man. He was splendid to see in his gleaming uniform. He stood expectantly in the background, a few paces from their living quarters.

The fact that he was here was unusual enough in itself.



## II

He stepped onto the dusty world and felt no more at ease. He thought of his task.

The task was unpleasant. He closed his lips and tried to think no more about it. Instead, he looked at his surroundings.

A uniform smooth plain stretched all the way to the horizon, pale yellow and empty. The planet seemed to be nothing but a collection of dust; his shoes sank to the ankles in the powdery stuff. He knew that the Epsilon base had no atmosphere. Conditions fit for men were found only under the giant glass dome. He looked automatically for the station.

While he walked along slowly, his eyes wandered from the building to the other side of the domed boundary. Thirteen transmitters stuck out of the dusty ground, shining, resembling lonely poles. He moved still further from the matter transmitter through which he had just come. He pressed the document more firmly to his body. His eyes glided back to the station.

The children were nowhere to be seen. They probably were carrying out an attack. The station appeared deserted. But old Fyr would be at his duties.

Lokart plodded on to the house. He saw the front door open and a gray-haired man in a faded uniform stepped out. He paused expectantly and looked toward Lokart as if by accident.

He had opened his collar and rolled up his sleeves. Slippers were

on his feet instead of boots. Lokart would normally have condemned the sloppy habits of the old man, but in this special case he felt nothing except pity. Automatically he smoothed his military jacket and fingered the silver symbol of the secret service.

His eyes became hard. He went to the old man and looked straight into his eyes. Poor, wild-eyed devil, he decided.

"Are you Fyr?" he asked.

The old man looked hostilely at him. "They won't leave me alone," he said roughly. "Or do you want to tell me you've brought provisions?" The old man looked past Lokart, toward the single transmitter. "I don't see any bundles . . ."

"I haven't brought provisions," Lokart said.

"Well?"

"I've been given authority." Lokart thought that it was best to get to the heart of the matter. "Here," he said, lifting his attache case a moment.

"Authority?" The old man grinned with amusement.

Lokart released the magnetic lock, took out the document, and handed it to the old man. The old man had watched his movements, shaking his head. He seemed uncertain whether this was a bad joke or downright serious. Then he read it. From time to time he muttered, "How about that!", but his smile had disappeared. The more he read, the gloomier his face grew. He gasped in anger, and the corners of his mouth trembled. Suddenly he threw

the document into the dust and began to laugh shrilly. He bent far back, his hands against his hips; his Adam's apple hopped in time with the bursts of laughter that emerged from his throat.

"What about it!" he exclaimed, suppressing his merriment with difficulty and wiping tears from his eyes. "That's the best joke that I've ever heard."

He burst out laughing noisily again.

Still Lokart said nothing. He felt even more uncomfortable than before.

"They want the children and me . . . ."

And once again he laughed. Then he stared at the thirteen transmitters.

"The children," he murmured. "My children. They should come, any minute."

As he walked slowly toward the matter transmitter, Lokart bent over the paper. He began to realize now how difficult his job would be.

He remained there by the house, expectantly.

Fyr, who had obviously been a stalwart officer, now stood with sagging shoulders some distance from the transmitters. Lokart thought he could hear him muttering softly to himself. Minutes crept by, each of them becoming an eternity.

Lokart could understand Fyr. He himself felt a responsibility for the well-being of the children. He didn't like it. Originally, he had been horrified at the mere thought of using abnormal children as weapons against the Spoot. But the situation

months ago had become rather desperate.

Lokart understood it now. If it hadn't been for the children, the war would have continued to demand victims, insatiably, from both sides. He knew that the general had not acted without thinking, but only for the sake of mankind. He thought about what would happen to the children now and unwillingly lowered his gaze. The decision would be a heavy blow to them. Especially for Fyr — Father Epsilon, as they called him.

The old man moved around restlessly. Lokart looked on.

What if something had happened involving the children? Now, during their last campaign? For Lokart was assured that it was the last one. This base must be abandoned, so read his orders.

Then his thoughts were interrupted. The transmitter fields began to glow, and seconds later the children emerged, one after the other. They stood uncertainly for a moment. Their helmets, built for Spoot heads, hung by straps at their sides. Their body armor and the protective screen devices were held in their hands. The shapeless devices seemed grotesque in their frail fingers.

They looked in amazement at Lokart. But then they saw only Father Epsilon and ran to him with happy shouts. A lively buzz of voices arose.

"My children . . . my children." And Fyr stretched out his arms, as if he sought to cover them all beneath an invisible mantle of protection. He wiped a hand across his

cheek, and Lokart could see that the hand came away wet.

"Papa, I blew up the munitions depot."

"It was easy this time."

"Sure it was. They hardly fought back."

"We really surprised them."

"And we weren't in danger at all."

"The storm helped us . . ."

Lokart moved out of the background. He walked to within a few strides of Fyr. Fyr knelt onto the dusty ground and embraced the children, one after the other, while they spoke with him.

But then the flow of words dried up, and they turned their great eyes on Lokart.

Poor devil, Lokart thought. They've all been somewhat cooped up and might get well in a sanitarium. And yet they had received injections, their bodies had been modified, so they could get along in the poisoned atmosphere and inhuman conditions of the Spoot world. And not only that: they had been *prepared*, so that a simple switching at the transmitter could change their faces and make them resemble the Spoot. They had been put down here along with this old fanatic who hated the Spoot like poison and naturally infected the children with his hate. With that feeling of antagonism in their hearts, they had been let loose against the Spoot. The children didn't know why they must kill. In fact, on closer examination, it was apparent that even the ruling powers didn't know

why the war had been waged against the Spoot, all this past year.

Lokart shook his head.

But that would be finished now. Lokart had come to fetch back Fyr and the children.

"Who's that?" a child asked, pointing at Lokart. He was perhaps twelve years old. Lokart studied him, shuddering. It was not the abnormally tall, pointed head that appeared to be acrocephalic which caused that evidence of emotion in Lokart, but the look that emerged from behind the thick, ruler-straight eyebrows.

Fyr stood up, one hand resting gently on the shoulder of the boy, and looked in an unfriendly manner at Lokart.

"This is a bad man," he said.

Lokart with an effort restrained himself from showing his dislike of the old man's words.

A girl of about eight lifted with her long, thin arm her weapon and fingered the switch, as if in challenge.

"He's a *man*, though," stated a dwarflike boy.

"Really?" another queried.

"Should I?" The eight-year-old questioned Fyr with her eyes. Her fingers moved toward the switch again.

The old man patted her cheek.

"You needn't, Ewika. He really is a *man*. And we're fighting only the Spoot." He looked sharply at Lokart, who stood there in hesitation. "Even if he's bad — we won't hurt him. We'll just chase him away."

Lokart still remained silent. "W-w-what does he want, P-p-papa?" The boy stuck three fingers into his crooked, toothless mouth. He stared without comprehension at the agent.

"He wants to forbid you to kill the Spoot."

"W-w-we'll ch-ch-chase him, ch-ch-chase him." He clenched his hands into tiny fists.

"That's what we'll do," several other children agreed.

Fyr shook his index finger, as if he intended to scold the children. "You'll stop that," he said mildly. "First I'll talk with him, that should do more good."

"Why can't we chase him?" the eight-year-old asked.

"Here's why," Fyr said. "If we chased away this bad man, he would tell other bad men about it — and then lots of them would come. We couldn't stop them."

"We could kill them all and run away over the Spoot world."

"We mustn't come back again."

"And what will happen to Father?" asked the boy who had identified Lokart as a man.

"You needn't worry about me. But you know that I can stay only a certain length of time on the Spoot world. No, no. We don't do any of the things you proposed. You're tired and you're going to bed. While you do that, I'll bargain with the bad man. That's best."

The children looked dissatisfied, but they obeyed without objections. This was praiseworthy, Lokart thought, but he strongly doubted if it was wise.

Fyr began to move toward the house, and the children followed him. Uninvited, Lokart brought up the rear.

### III

**I**n the house it was pleasantly cool. From somewhere a ventilator poured out the odor of fir trees. They entered a long room that contained thirteen bedlike resting places. Lokart had already been told about these "cradles." The children lay in these after their attacks, for they needed rest and relaxation. And while they slept in them, they were given liquid nourishment.

Fyr brought the children to the cradles, gave them the feeding tubes and prepared the breathing apparatus. Their lungs needed the compensating atmosphere, after the visit to the Spoot world. After Fyr had taken care of his children, he signaled Lokart to follow him. They came to a sparsely furnished room. A red-covered table and a plain bed represented the only furniture, aside from two wooden chairs. The only thing that recalled civilization was the microfilm library that took up one entire wall.

"Sit down," Fyr said. His voice now sounded less hostile than at the beginning.

Lokart decided to let the old man begin the conversation. He studied Fyr thoughtfully. Fyr had propped his elbows on the table and folded his hands. He stared into nothingness.

"How determined is the command about this?" Fyr began.

"As determined as it could be."

"But why? Can't these idiots remember what it was like for the soldiers, before there were Morph-children? They were killed in droves. They could hardly advance in those clumsy pressure suits. And the Spoot were smart enough not to leave their world. They stuck to their defensive tactics . . . while mankind moves ahead, explores, constructs, forms ever greater goals for himself. He has a right to the Spoot world." His face had grown ruddy. One hand had clenched into a fist. "What's come over people now? Why do they want to recall their only real weapons, the Morph-children? I ask you, why?"

"It's all explained in the document that I gave you," Lokart said evasively.

Fyr waved the words away with a hand.

"I didn't finish reading that silly piece of paper. What is the reason?"

"The war with the Spoot is ended. Peace reigns."

"No," Fyr whispered, sinking back in his chair in disbelief. "No, that can't be true. I can't believe it!"

"I'm sorry for you?" Fyr mocked him. "You should be sorry for mankind! Have you forgotten already what the Spoot did to us? How they committed atrocities to men?"

"Mankind didn't exactly treat the Spoot with kid gloves either," Lokart objected.

"Yes, but why? You must take that into consideration. Who started to behave harshly?"

"You already know my answer."

"All the Spoot needed to do was to give up, and the war wouldn't have broken out."

"That's a matter of opinion. However, peace reigns now, and all the bases are to be vacated."

"That's easy to say. You weren't much more than a child when the war started. And besides, I can tell from your accent that you don't come from Earth. Am I right?"

Lokart nodded.

"Well, there are different opinions in the colonies."

Lokart felt it was best to keep quiet.

"Did you lose anyone who meant a lot to you during the war?"

Lokart knew what would come next; he knew Fyr's routine by heart. He shook his head.

"I thought so!" Fyr wrinkled his brows, as if he must think profoundly. "I lost someone, but I can't exactly remember now. Amnesia, you know. But I think it was my wife. Or was it? I don't know, either she died while gathering flowers, or . . . . My wife loved flowers . . . and me. Yes, she loved me so much." Old Fyr pushed the gray hair off his forehead and folded his bony hands. "She always said: 'When I'm dead, I want lots of flowers on my grave. Then I won't mind death.' That's what she said."

Lokart felt still more uncertain of himself. He made a restless motion. The old man had ruined the entire fine talk that he had planned regarding duty and obedience and toleration.

Fyr's wife might have said some-

thing of the sort, Lokart thought. But her wish had not come true. She had been abducted by the Spoot. And, probably, killed. But his wife was not the only person close to him whom he had lost. There were also his four sons who had served on the same warship. They had lost their lives in a battle in space. Thereupon, Fyr's mind, totally unable to believe in this loss, had taken refuge in another world. Fyr had lost his memory, in great part. But the military thought that he was suitable to be entrusted with the project of the Morph-children.

Since then he'd considered as his own the thirteen children of his post. Of course Lokart had no intention to try to talk him out of this notion. But he had a job to do.

"They must all be killed," Fyr said, with no apparent cause. "Nobody wanted to go that far, Fyr."

But Fyr was not listening to him. "Peace," he said. "It's unbelievable. And you want to take the children and me to Earth?"

"Not to Earth. To a planet where there is medical help, where you can recuperate."

"What?" Fyr's face flushed from excitement. "In a madhouse?"

"You don't understand. The children should be relieved of their condition. They'll get good care, so that they catch up on their backwardness. This is done for the best of the children — and if you love them you must give them to me."

"And that is all?" Fyr asked, suspiciously.

"Of course the transmitter will be dismantled."

Fyr leaped up with a liveliness that Lokart hadn't believed he could manage.

"Are men going crazy?" he cried. "Peace, bah! Suicide, I'd call it."

Lokart also arose.

"But look at it this way . . . ." he tried to calm Fyr.

"No!"

Lokart was frightened by the violence of the shout.

"You won't dismantle the transmitters," Fyr said shrilly, and his eyes flashed. Lokart moved toward him in an appeasing manner — but suddenly the old man had a weapon in his hand.

"Man," Lokart declared, "be reasonable."

"You be reasonable!" ordered the old man and gestured with the weapon. "Walk in front of me."

"What are you going to do?" Lokart didn't move from the spot.

"No arguments. Go through that door."

Fyr was serious. Lokart could tell from his face. He seemed to have gone mad. Unwillingly, Lokart opened the door, keeping his eyes on the muzzle of the weapon, and walked down the path. "Keep to the left!" came the order from Fyr.

They moved down the path. Lokart constantly felt the weapon in his back. Then they came to a small, metal door. Fyr pressed a hidden button; slowly the door glided open. Through the opening that resulted appeared a great cellar, to which stone steps led down. In

the darkness before them Lokart could distinguish faint lights on instrument panels. Machinery covered three of the four walls.

They stood at the heart of the Epsilon station.

Lokart looked hastily over his shoulder; then he regarded again Fyr and the weapon. If only he would come closer, then perhaps Lokart could subdue him. But the old man seemed quite sure of himself. He motioned to Lokart, without moving an inch, to go down the steps.

"Can you guess what I'm going to do?" Fyr asked.

"You're crazy!"

"Not a bit. I'm just trying to save mankind. And you aren't going to stop me. Keep moving!"

"You'll have to shoot me if you intend to carry out your plan."

"I'll do that only if I really must."

"You'd actually kill me?"

"Only under certain conditions. So keep quiet in your own interests and do what I tell you." Fyr laughed. "Or do you want it to come to that?"

Lokart shook his head — but he seemed unshaken, as if he were concentrating on what lay ahead.

They came to the last step. Lokart stopped.

The weapon in the old man's hand did not waver. "Keep going."

Lokart stepped onto a narrow, metal catwalk that ran across a deep gaping opening. He steadied himself with one hand on the railing. Their steps rang hollowly, echoing from the walls. Light flamed in tubes on one wall.

One glance was sufficient. Lokart identified the surroundings at once. He had been told about the place where the bombs were stored. But he moved slowly along, as if he suspected nothing. He still had hope that Fyr would not take the ultimate step.

"Stop!" warned Fyr's voice. Lokart's hopes, which had been quite slender, disappeared.

"You didn't hope," the old man continued, "that I would forget the bombs?"

The pair stood before the steel armored door.

"Stand against the wall," Fyr ordered. Lokart obeyed. He walked carefully across the narrow catwalk, to avoid a fall into the depths, toward the other side of the cellar.

The old man took the weapon in his left hand. With the other hand he manipulated the combination of the lock. His eyes shifted back and forth, from Lokart, who attentively watched his motions, to the lock. After a minute's work, a sharp click resounded.

Fyr turned several small wheels, and the steel door swung open.

#### IV

Behind it lay the bombs, gleaming and deadly. Fyr looked at them almost lovingly. Lokart's eyes narrowed to tiny slits. He was motionless.

"I'm sorry, my good friend, but you must turn around now. I've got to make sure that you don't ruin my plan at the last minute. And kneel down over there. Don't try to jump

me. This thing might go off suddenly." Fyr stepped forward. He had again shifted the weapon to his right hand. "I'll shut you up in here. Don't do anything stupid. You'll keep safe and sound here. And now, dear Captain Lokart . . ."

Fyr's last words had come as if squeezed from his lips, and Lokart knew that now he was ready to act. He had no more time to wonder why the old man could make such a stupid mistake, but leaped with all his strength to one side, onto the metal catwalk.

In the next moment he felt something solid flash past his head and land on his shoulder. In agony, he clenched his teeth and rolled over. He hadn't dopped an instant too soon. His head buzzed, but he didn't lose consciousness. His hands clasped the metal edge as he heard Fyr's steps ring on the metal walk. With difficulty, Lokart arose, one hand pressed against the aching side of his head. And suddenly he was alert.

"You fool!" he cried. "Come back, Fyr!"

Fyr's face appeared over the wall that led from the entrance of the cellar.

"You can't stop me," he shouted, and a scornful laugh followed his words. "If I can't kill all the Spoot, at least I'll destroy one of their worlds."

"Wait, Fyr!"

"Why? I'm all alone now. The Spoot destroyed my family, do you understand me?"

Lokart had slowly risen. As if

hypnotized, his eyes clung to the coldly gleaming surface of the bomb. Fyr had encircled it with one arm, while he held the gun in the other hand. He was completely mad. He might do anything. Lokart would have no easy job of it. But there was still one chance. He must not let Fyr get out of the cellar. He must hold Fyr here. He must divert Fyr's attention.

"Do you hear me?" Fyr shouted. "My sons are dead. Don't make a move!"

"But," Lokart objected, "your children are in the dormitory."

Fyr cocked his head, then he whispered: "I thought so, too, until now. But that's not right. I don't know how it is, but I'm suddenly sure that my sons are dead."





Lokart was astonished. Had old Fyr got his memory back? If this were so, he might actually be able to talk reasonably to him. But Lokart's theory proved false in the next moment, for Fyr said suddenly:

"The Spoot killed all my thirteen children. I must avenge them." He nodded emphatically. "Yes, I must avenge them." A wild look gleamed out of his gray eyes. He no longer seemed to see Lokart.

Lokart was within reach of the switch that would cut the power from the thirteen transmitters. If he turned it, the matter senders and receivers never would be in use again.

The old man looked into nothingness.

At that moment Lokart leaped forward. As he fell, he grabbed the switch, felt it yield and open. At



the same moment a shot screamed through the cellar. Fyr had fired. But the shot missed Lokart. He lay there, seemingly wounded. When he cautiously raised his head, he saw Fyr's legs vanishing through the door.

The old man had dropped his weapon; it lay on one of the upper steps. In his haste to commit the deed of madness, he had even allowed the metal door to the cellar to stand open. Lokart could hear the wheezing breath of the old man as his heavy, stomping steps faded into the distance.

Lokart stood up and staggered with throbbing head into the open. He saw Fyr stumbling toward one of the transmitters. And then Lokart cursed his own lack of caution.

Although he'd been told about it, he had not remembered in time that the thirteen transmitters did not switch off simultaneously. They would be turned off individually, one after the other. The first matter-transmitter was already dark. Lokart spurted ahead, crying: "Come back, Fyr, before it's too late!"

"Traitor!" the old man roared in reply and raised the bomb.

With weapon aimed, Lokart stood uncertain before the house. Should he shoot? Then the old man would die, and the bomb would explode. And that meant that the base, the children, the old man and himself would be gone. While he was weighing this thought, a wild laugh burst from the throat of the old man, ending only when he disappeared into one of the transmitters.

Lokart decided, too late. The explosion came in the transmitter's field.

## V

The Morph-children were not sleeping well. They needed rest, but they found none. The bad man upset them.

And then, after a lapse of time that they could not reckon exactly, they heard the explosion. They jumped in fright. They listened. Steps. Voices. Another explosion — and they were completely awake.

Almost simultaneously they threw down the breathing masks, tossed aside the nourishment tubes.

They looked at each other silently. Their understanding was not too good, but they had an instinct: they all sensed the danger.

And then from thirteen throats a cry rang out, a cry born out of fear: "Father!"

The children jumped up and ran out of the sleeping area. Lead-colored nutrient liquid flowed from the abandoned tubes.

The twelve-year-old boy with the pointed head was the first to leave the building. He stood on the dusty ground in front of the house and looked at the bad stranger, who was standing only a few feet away from a transmitter. The other children crowded behind the boy, their nerves strung up to the point of breaking. They could feel a churning in their stomachs. Their concern for Father Epsilon was over-powering.

But the twelve-year-old signaled them with a motion of his hand to

stand still. He walked with slow steps toward the stranger, who was looking at him with a poker face. But he could hide only from the children the thoughts that were passing through his mind.

How long would it take Fyr to prime the bomb? To put it in a certain spot? And to return?

Too long to return. Not long enough to prevent him from carrying out his plans. Already six of the transmitters were dark. Before long the rest of them would fade out.

Lokart's face slowly began to betray emotion, but not because of the pain that he felt throughout his body. It was the thought of what was to come that caused his dismay.

"Where is Father Epsilon?" The twelve-year-old stood only a few paces from him.

"Stay where you are," Lokart commanded. "There are no more goals."

"A menace?" The twelve-year-old cocked his head.

"No," came the weary reply. "You can't have your father now."

"What did they do to him?"

"Nothing. He has been transferred through a transmitter into the Spoot world. He can't breathe its atmosphere very long."

Another transmitter went dark.

But the boy had already disappeared.

Despair almost overwhelmed Lokart when he saw the other children moving in his footsteps. Instantly he raised the weapon that he had retained in one hand.

"Don't come a step closer!" he

cried. "You know how this weapon works." He was sickened at the thought that the children might not pay heed to his words. Of course, he wouldn't shoot them.

But they stood still after all. Not, however, to remain on the same spot, but to get into formation. They fanned out and approached Lokart in a half-circle.

Ten transmitters were extinguished by now.

"Stay where you are," he ordered the children again. "Don't you see how the matter-transmitters are all going dark? There's no way back from the Spoot world."

The children came nearer.

Eleven transmitters were already dark.

"He's a spy from the Spoot!" the children yelled. "A spy!"

The twelfth transmitter blinked out, and its dead, gaping mouth and dark, motionless dials stared at them.

"You're old enough," Lokart tried again, "and smart enough, too. You must have found out why I'm here; to get you off this horrible world, to take you to an evergreen planet. The war with the Spoot is ended."

"We don't need to fight any more?"

Lokart hesitated. He must be careful now.

"No, you needn't fight any more," he said. "You . . ."

Only one transmitter still glowed.

"He's a spy! He killed Father!" cried Ewika. With a single twist of her body, she rushed forward, toward the last matter-transmitter. A brief hesitation, and the other children rushed after her.

Lokart felt himself torn to pieces. With one look over his shoulder, he realized that the children were running to their deaths. And in the same instant, he experienced the greatest surprise of his life. And jumped with relief in completely unmilitary manner.

The twelve-year-old came from the transmitter and pulled at an arm. The children were suddenly motionless, as if frozen in their tracks; then there was motion in their midst.

With united efforts they dragged Fyr from the matter-transmitter. Then something occurred that caused Lokart greater astonishment than this abrupt emergence of Fyr and the boy. A Spoot hung on the old man's arm.

Fyr still embraced the bomb tightly. Probably he had tried to flee from the boy. The ticking of the timing device merged into his rattling breath.

The children surrounded Fyr. Lokart forced his way through them and yanked the bomb from the grasp of the old man.

His eyes fell on the treacherous flashing of the time device, and he felt a trembling overpower his hands. Suppose the bomb went off at this moment? He didn't dare to think about it. Using his utmost willpower, he forced his hands to remain steady. The bomb had the power to destroy an entire world. It was created for the most extreme necessity. Quickly, without thinking, Lokart removed the firing mechanism.

Fyr stammered something. His

eyes ran constantly over the Spoot who had helped to rescue him. The first sign of paralysis appeared as a result of the poisonous atmosphere. "A face mask!" Lokart yelled, and two children rushed into the building.

When Lokart looked up, he saw that the last of the transmitters had gone dead.

And then he jumped at an unearthly scream. The Spoot writhed on the ground, pulled itself with sharp claws through the dust toward the transmitter. But it was too late; it couldn't get there.

It arose, staggering, and its wings whipped the air until the dust whirled up. Again a scream emerged from its sharp-edged jaws, then it collapsed and lay motionless on the ground — inches away from the still Fyr. Lokart saw with his next glance that it was dead.

The old man pushed himself up with his last strength. His hand ran across the strange, rough body of the Spoot.

"Every time I start to grow fond of something, fate tears it away from me," he whispered, almost inaudibly. Then his glance fell on Lokart. "But my children are living. I'm so happy . . ." His eyes wandered to the children. "Be good to him, he means well for you. I was wrong . . ."

With that, his eyelids went down as if made of lead.

## VI

Lokart sat in the dust, his back against the building's wall. He

had opened the blouse of his uniform and rolled up his sleeves. He was thoughtful.

He had learned a lot from this. A strength he had never experienced before flooded through him, augmented by the certainty that he had gained by his experience on the Epsilon base: Man is fundamentally good; but he must be persuaded to believe in this good.

Fyr would live. That made Lokart feel better.

Just now, Fyr was in a cradle, sleeping in exhaustion the sleep of the just. He was breathing through the oxygen mask.

Little Ewika came from the building. Her long, skinny arms dangled at her sides.

"Uncle," she called. "Father is awake. He wants to see you."

Lokart got up. She took his hand and hopped along beside him. "He's so happy," the eight-year-old rejoiced.

They entered the building together.

Fyr was waiting for him. He had taken over the breathing mask.

"Hello," Lokart said. "You're better already."

"They can't keep me down," Fyr smiled, still somewhat peakedly. "Sit down, Captain Lokart."

"Thanks."

Silence prevailed for a time. They looked at each other, a trifle embarrassed. The children had gone away, without being told to do it.

Finally Fyr spoke:

"Are you going to put the children in an institution now?"

Lokart made an effort not to reveal the fact that he gulped. "I

have already told you . . . ."

The old man cut him short. Notwithstanding his exhaustion, his gesture was impressively energetic. "You know what I mean, all right. Of course, I'm sure that you want to do right. But I don't like it. You have some influence?" the old man asked suddenly.

"If I can do something for you — certainly. You have lots of friends."

"You feel sorry for me, then?" It sounded like a definite statement.

"No. You don't understand me."

"Ah, come on, don't pretend. I know that I'm eccentric. I know ~~my~~ faults. I just didn't want to admit them before. But we aren't sticking to the subject."

Lokart looked straight at the old man.

"Well, then?"

"The institution is proper for the children. They must learn to take care of themselves, to stand in their own feet. What about when I'm no longer here?"

Lokart nodded in silence. What could he say?

"I won't live much longer," Fyr continued. "No, don't interrupt me. An old man realizes it when his time comes. But there are still a few years left. Certainly enough years, until the children are ready to be let loose on humanity." The old man laughed softly to himself.

"They're nice children," Lokart said quietly.

Fyr propped himself on his elbows and nodded. "Yes, nice children. That's why I don't want to lose them." His voice became stronger.

"Do you understand? I'm old and have nothing except the children. I don't want to lose them. I want to spend the evening years of my life with them. I could get them ready for their later lives."

Silence. Then Fry resumed: I'll be a good instructor for them. I promise you that, Captain Lokart."

Lokart still said nothing.

"Could you arrange things?"

The children had been brought up as killers. Wouldn't Fry be the proper person to correct this upbringing?

After a pause, Lokart said:

"Certainly." But his voice was troubled.

"That isn't an empty promise?" The old man clutched Lokart by the arm.

"No, it isn't an empty promise.

It'll definitely be arranged that way. Even if I have to shake up the whole empire." And as he said this he was sincere, certain that it was the best way.

"Thanks." Fry's voice became weaker. He offered his hand to Lokart. The two men shook hands. Fry's grip was firm.

The old man let himself sink back.

"Excuse me," he said. "But I'm tired."

His eyes closed.

"Go to sleep." Lokart stood up carefully. He looked back once, then he went out on tiptoes. Out to the children, who would become good men some day.

Lokart was sure of that.

END

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**G**reff listened. Lying in the narrow cot, he gazed unseeingly at the vertical strip of light that fell through the slightly open door upon the opposite wall. He listened. Outside, it was day or perhaps night, it hardly mattered which. At the moment, the shutters, over the fastened portholes kept out any gleam of light from the outer world. He glanced at the luminous dial of his watch, and noted that he had been asleep a little more than seven hours. It had been nightfall when he went to sleep. So now it must be full sunlight — that dingy, glaucous, oily sunlight that speared uneasily through the fog, after traveling so many millions of kilometers. Day, night . . . different degrees of darkness, that was all, with little meaning for them, penned up in a metal sphere adrift upon an ocean of liquid gases. Through the thick material of the portholes, they could never make out anything but a wall of fog, in front, behind, which

blended indistinguishably at the bottom of the gray blur of the ocean, and at the top, lightened enough to suggest a sky. For them, time was still Earth time; that was what their watches measured, and the big clock in the middle of the control room: twelve hours of duty, twelve hours of rest. Of course, they could modify that program for their own convenience. The important thing was that one or the other of them should always be near the instruments. In fact, they spent almost all their time in the control room. Only the lack of space had kept them from having a cot in there, so that even while one of them was asleep, the other should not be alone.

Rial was adjusting the knobs of the radio. Actually this was the main reason for keeping track of these five-hour days and nights; the planet's rotation determined their position with respect to the Earth, and the half-dozen relays that made

it possible to maintain that delicate contact, drawn thin as a spiderweb. Rial in front of the radio . . .

Greff could see him in his mind's eye, perched on the edge of the stool, both elbows on the shelf to keep from trembling, his long, thin fingers curved around the black knobs, his blond head tilted a little to listen.

He was slowly moving the tuning knob. Across the dial moved the scale of frequencies. When the knob had turned as far as it would go, it changed bands and started back in the other direction.

Growls, sputters, cracklings. All the wave-trains in the universe seemed to converge on the network of their antennas, tumble into it as if down a funnel and decant themselves into the little steel box. The crackling of a magnetic storm in the upper layers of the atmosphere. The dull rumbling of a star millions of light-years distant. The sharp impact of a cosmic particle. A staccato emission that sounded as if it might be laden with meaning — who could tell? A shrill whistle, or a deep rumbling that made the left hand jump to turn down the gain. A faint rattle of modulated sounds that might almost have been words rather than natural phenomena and which came from very far away — beyond Pluto, according to the directional antennas that swiveled at the touch of a milled knob . . . out of incredible distances that man had never reached, where no spaceship had yet ventured. Words, perhaps, but without the key that would make it possible to

decipher them. Yet they were inscribed on the molecules of dozens of magnetic taps stacked in the cabinets of the station. Some day, perhaps, they would yield up their secret to someone, or else be definitely established as sounds without meaning.

Every now and then, human words. Words that came from Earth, or more often from spaceships or other stations. Rial bent over, forcing up the gain, and Greff cocked an ear. Two spaceships between Mars and Jupiter, exchanging coordinates. Serious business disposed of, the conversation grew more informal. Men who would perhaps never meet in their lives were kidding around like old buddies, across a distance of tens of thousands of kilometers.

Parts of sentences were blotted out by fading of the signal. When a name was mentioned, the tone became more serious again. The man who had been asked about was dead — or at least "missing" in that inconceivable eater-of-men that was space. A station in orbit around Mars joined in, gave the latest news of Earth, of expeditions in flight.

A rocket announced its arrival to the base on Titan. After a long pause the base replied, and then it was the usual exchange of figures, call-signals, coded information.

The machine-gun crackling of an artificial satellite transmitter faded in to cover the voice of a bored pilot. A freak reception brought to Rial's receiver a few scraps of a broadcast from a control station on Earth.



The sound of all those human voices was sometimes so clear that for a moment Greff found it hard to believe that they were the farthest outpost of the solar system . . . they two alone.

Rial spoke. Greff jumped up, for the first few words seemed to be addressed to him. Only then did he distinguish the low hum that meant the mike was turned on. It was always this way when one of them spoke on the radio, if the other was a little distance away, but close enough to hear.

Rial was transmitting to a relay on Mimas the results of their yesterday's observations: temperatures, pressures, currents, winds. Greff went back to his cot, annoyed. What good was it? What was the use of this pretension of theirs, in their grain of sand tossed by the milky waves, to see everything, to know everything around them? What was the use of going on playing this game? Weren't they their own masters, completely out of touch for months and months? And they were together, alone — wasn't that the most important thing?

Rial heard him move; the transmission ended, he got up. He stood motionless a moment on the sill, his body outlined against the lighted rectangle.

Outside, the tempest. The station, buffeted and gripped by waves twenty times taller than itself, rolls and pitches miserably, plunges and disappears under an oily scum. Everything in it is firmly secured to the floor, on the curved walls, or

URANUS

even the ceiling, where containers bulge under a flexible lining. At the first signs of bad weather, Greff has sent a message, then retracted the antennas to keep them safe.

Thus cut off from everything, deprived of their last human contact, they wait. They do not know how long this may go on. They will wait. There are one or two storms like this every terrestrial month. One of them went on for eleven days. The last one, only thirty-seven hours.

Rial is sick. He is lying down. With nothing to do, Greff is sitting at his bedside. At times it is difficult to keep his seat on the chair, which threatens to slide out from under him. Rial's eyes are closed. He has gone to sleep holding Greff's wrist. The sphere's hull booms, groans, under the heavy blows of the waves.

The voice that burred in the loudspeaker came from Jupiter, relayed by Callisto, because the transmitter was on the far side of Jupiter.

Good news and bad, and some items of no interest to them. The scientists were still arguing — what else could you expect? — about the degree of intelligence of the larval creatures which seemed to constitute the highest form of life on Venus. The commentator recalled previous vain efforts to communicate with the inhabitants of other planets and to "penetrate the secret of nonhuman intelligences." A class one spaceship had crash-landed on Vesta: eighteen dead, the whole crew. On Saturn, a giant platform anchored to the frozen gases of the

surface was being completed. Numerous airtight living domes would be erected on it, and at some future date there were plans to assemble rockets brought there in pieces. Incidentally, studies were being made of the possibility of using the atmosphere of the planet itself, mainly composed of methane, as fuel for thermal motors. A survey ship was en route to Uranus, toward Greff and Rial. It would arrive in a few months. There had been a landslide in one of the oldest inhabited craters of the Moon. No lives had been lost, but the material losses were considerable. On Earth, the latest annual statements of the metallurgic industry, of mechanical construction companies, electronics and plastics firms, all those whose activity was linked with the conquest of space, were highly encouraging.

Then came a long series of personal messages. Belzard wanted to hear from Fairbanks. Oths was trying to get in touch again with Mercanson, on Io. Su-Chang's mother had just died. Wecks, taken ill, had had to be brought to Mars from Deimos on a special flight; then he had died on the trip.

The transmission ended without their names having been mentioned.

By a caprice of the winds which cleared a hole in the fog, it was astonishingly bright outside for several hours, with that sort of light which they had known sometimes on Earth, in winter, when a heavy snowfall threatened. But shortly thick clouds came back, at the level of the waves, to imprison the floating station once more.

Rial spent long minutes behind the glass of the portholes, staring at the fog. Every now and then he called Greff to him.

"Don't you see anything? There."

Greff smiled, took him by the shoulders. "Come on," he said.

Rial was down below, busy with the weekly harvest of the algae vats. Through the open hatchway, Greff heard the clink of steel on glass. On the big round platter that Rial had laid near him fresh shoots, grown during the last twenty-four hours, would be piling up. He could also hear the sound, muffled when the hatch was closed, of the motor that made the water in the vats circulate slowly around the stems and worked the pump that drew stale air from all parts of the station toward the plants. In this way the plants got the carbon dioxide necessary to their nutrition and released oxygen which was pumped to the level above.

*This is the career I chose.*

*Twenty years spent in stations or aboard spaceships.*

*It's my life. My whole life as a man. It's all I know: twenty years!*

*What will I do when they retire me?*

The light in the control room has flickered and gone out at the same moment the radio has gone. Rial has turned on the emergency lights, then set to work to find the trouble. He has been able to find it fairly quickly, but the repairs are delicate and hard to do alone. He wakes Greff, and they begin working together.

They have taken up the big panel in the control-room floor, and Greff is working in the space below, squatting, only his bent head visible.

"See if it works now."

Rial steps across the room, presses a button. Nothing happens. Greff bends once more over the entrails of the electrical system. The heat is off; they are beginning to feel the cold. Greff is wondering if it wouldn't be a good idea to turn on the emergency heating, in case the repairs take a long time.

"Hand me the wrench."

Rial's hand holding the tool, a few centimeters from his face. A slender, neat, pale hand . . .

"I'll be a station manager some day," says Rial. "Like you."

"And without me. You'll be the station manager, but you'll always be in a cage, like this one, in spite of your gold braid."

"On a planet in another system, maybe . . ."

"Maybe."

Some day, others would be going out to the stars. Where would he be then?

He turned the gain knob to the left, until only a faint murmur came from the loudspeaker. Careful to make no sound, he pushed his stool aside and tiptoed to the door.

Rial was asleep. Greff remained in the doorway, listening to the regular sound of his breathing.

**I**t occurred to Greff that with a little luck, fooling around with the knobs, he might have come across

the transmission from Mercury, if the signal were strong enough and the conditions favorable.

As it was, all he was getting was an echo, a retransmission from a station on Saturn. The meaning was there, but stripped of the spontaneity of the original message.

The sun had entered a phase of intense activity. The Mercury observatory, which specialized in solar research, had tried to measure it, to encompass it in numbers. At the end of two days, their apparatus lost its usefulness. It was not calibrated high enough. Other observatories hastily took an interest in the phenomenon, equipped themselves, installed new instruments. All the observations led to the same conclusion: a gigantic solar flare, on a scale greater than anything previously known, with monstrous prominences.

A torrent of radiation of all kinds was pouring out into space. Nights on Earth were one long twilight, dominated by auroral displays visible even in the tropics. Daylight became dazzling in the earliest hours of the morning and furnace-hot with ultra-violets and infrareds. Magnetic needles swung wildly, and radio communications were often garbled, in spite of the beamed transmission.

Mercury fell silent. Its messages had grown more and more disquieting up until the last one, a choked-off cry to agony. Two spaceships had been able to escape in time, carrying a few non-essential technicians. Three others had been on the launching areas, ready to follow

in haste and bring off the rest of the Terran colony if the situation grew untenable. Nothing more was ever heard of these ships, nor of several others that were enroute to bring help to the planet.

*Death by fire.* By a fire that was not composed of flames, but of invisible radiations that burned the skin, exposed the flesh and burned that, roasted the man alive. There was no defense. Metal buckled and melted, concrete crumbled, plastics ran into shimmering oceans of burning hot glue. Only caverns under the earth, natural or artificial, seemed to offer protection for the moment. But already the air piped into them was arriving desperately dry, as if cooked, and no known process of hydration or purification was adequate to reconstitute it. Down there, men panted for breath in front of their detector dials, which showed a steady advance in the intensity of the radiation that was reaching them.

For too long we had forgotten that the sun was a star like other stars, that it was better not to venture too near it; that some day it might turn into a monster, a devourer of worlds . . . and of men.

Greff and Rial, bent over their radio, followed the course of the cataclysm hour by hour.

"We're going to be in the first row when it happens," said Rial.

"Or in the last," Greff thought; but he did not say it aloud.

Mercury was dead; shortly Venus fell silent. The planet of jungles and winds sank in its turn under the flood. Never had there been so

much sunlight under the blanket of cloud; but no one was left to see it.

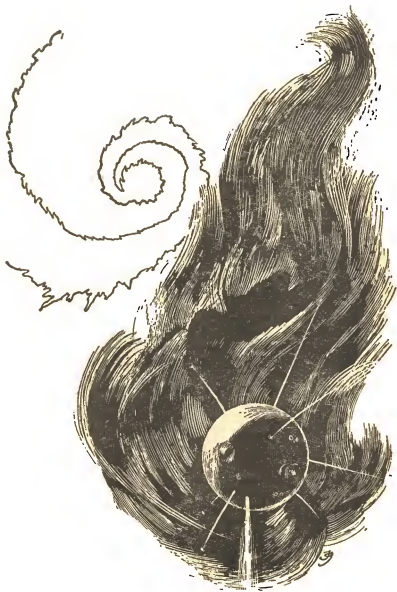
*Escape.* Some had been able to. A few rockets had been roasted in mid-flight; others had been able to reach Earth, or pass beyond . . .

The Earth.

A wind of panic had been blowing there for weeks, and no one could stand against it. (How? What could anyone say? What promises could he make, what guarantees could he give?) The ant-hill's population scurried in all directions, seeking an exit which existed, but was not large enough for all.

Vegetation shriveled, while the threads of water in the riverbeds dwindled day by day. But before long the glaciers, the eternal snows of the mountains, in their melting filled the valleys with devastating torrents that rushed to meet the other floods arising from the estuaries, full of water from oceans swollen by the melting of the polar ice. Fire and water were locked in combat, and between them, the Earth. The air itself took part in the struggle. Dried out in its upper layers, it sucked up the humidity it lacked from a surface increased by the slow advance of the waters up the coasts. By their irruptions into the plains. The horizons were invisible behind the curtain of vapor that rose from every puddle. For a moment it seemed possible that a precarious balance of forces was coming into being.

Then the water level, stable for  
INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE FICTION



an instant, began its endless fall. No more sky, at least as the word had been understood on Earth. No more blue in the heavens. A blanket of cloud, always. Animals and men had perished, all those who had not found shelter and a stay of execution on the Earth or fled always farther Out. The bottoms of the oceans were uncovered, slime, rocks, and garlands of salt, and the sea itself began to boil, while the continents split open, there where men had lived, giving passage to the central fire.

"I had a sister."  
"I still had my parents."  
"I was going to get married on my next leave."  
"I had a house in the country, with a garden and some chickens."  
"I had a dog."  
"I liked to go to the movies."

Those in space spoke among themselves, over the radio, of what they had lost on Earth. But in the heart of each one, there was a little voice whose shouts they suppressed:

*"And what about me? Will I find a place to set my foot in six months, a year? Or am I, too, going to . . . ?"*

When they did not suppress it well enough . . .

There was a spaceship that dived straight into the heart of the furnace. It had on board refugees from Venus who had had to flee once more from Earth.

There were those who, having left Earth, landed on Mars . . . where the colonists were preparing to flee still farther out.

There was not enough fuel for the rockets' engines. Many of them had to stay pinned to the ground, unuseable. Tons of the precious powder had burned, down there on Earth. On Mars, there was not enough to supply all the ships that had escaped. There was fighting over accommodations on those that were leaving.

And, abandoning the tiny asteroid stations to their fate, the survivors sought refuge on Jupiter and its satellites, where there was not room enough under the domes to receive them all.

"Will I . . . ?"

Icy fear had made its way into the hermetically sealed station; it crawled on the floor beside Rial, twined around the ankles.

Space. That wasn't it; it wasn't space. It was the rocket that brought you and the black sky all around, above and below. He had protested when they had assigned him to a station. That was a job for an older man, not for a kid. He had had to give in. Discipline.

There had been Greff. Greff, who was old enough to be there.

Later on, a station manager, like Greff. But before that, to travel in space . . .

To die here, caught in a trap. In a trap with Greff, in a trap that Greff had lured him into, kept him in. He accused him of it: "You're the station manager, you could have rejected me."

Greff answered with numbers, millions of kilometers. "Nineteen times farther from the sun than Earth."

The sun and the Earth, Rial thought. The blazing sun of summer afternoons and the pale sun of winter. And they were nineteen times farther out. Here they had never seen the sun through the clouds. But he knew that if they had seen it, it would have been no more than a bright star, nothing like their warmth-giving luminary. *My God*, he found himself praying, *don't let me see it!*

"Twice as far as Saturn."

An enormous gulf in space. On one side, themselves; on the other, the orbits of Mercury, Venus, Earth, Jupiter and the planetoids. Saturn might yet perish, but they?

And on Jupiter, Io, Callisto, Europa and Ganymede, solids and liquids became gases again, and on Saturn as well, and the conflagration began.

One by one, the familiar voices fell silent. Some had time enough to say good-bye; others were simply extinguished, snuffed out like candles.

A time came when the radio was silent. Heads together, their hair touching, they turned the knobs, gain at maximum, slowly sweeping the whole scale of frequencies. Nothing but background noise, colossal amplified by the cataclysm. And those other sounds, which were perhaps the voices of creatures in other stars.

Alone.

For months, they had been an outpost of the solar system, in a precarious situation, far from everything — far from help, above all. Now, beyond doubt, they were

the last survivors of humanity. For how long?

Man was born to conquer the stars. That was what Greff had always been taught, since he'd been old enough to understand. That was what his mother had told him — even when she'd known that his father would never come back again.

"You'll go out to the stars."

His father had not gone there, but he would go.

That was what the little murmuring voices under his pillow kept repeating, all night long.

*"You go out to the stars. You'll go . . . You'll go . . ."*

He would go out to the stars. For that, school, college.

"What are you going to do when graduate?"

"I'm going out to the stars."

An examination that lasted for days on end. Then Space School. Six years. The best brains of Earth in the most robust bodies. The classrooms, the long evenings, then the little voice under the pillow that prepared you for tomorrow's lesson. Physical training, every day, in preparation for the first takeoff. A hitch at a launching area; a hitch on an artificial satellite. A tough test, after which the failures were pitilessly eliminated. They wouldn't go out to the stars; they'd be the grounded ones, the helmeted men in red, green, yellow uniforms that swarmed around the rocket before takeoff.

Going into town at the end of every month, in the white uniform,

the two open hands on a field of stars embroidered in gold on the cap. The whole routine. Groups of twenty, thirty of them in the bars and night clubs. Drinks. Brawls. The screaming girls and the "ground-grippers" who wanted to put the future starmen in their places. The police, who showed up and hauled off the ground grippers. Not the future spacemen.

Not for him, those free-for-alls. He had a good head for math, and there was his father who hadn't been able to go out to the stars; and it was up to him to go. He would go, but it meant work, work, work. No binges with the others, no girls.

So when the others went to town, he stayed in his room to work, almost alone in the big echoing building. Every once in a while, a footstep in the corridor. Another "grind" coming to spend an hour with him. Often it went on for two or three days, a few staying to work while the others were off having fun. That was the way it had happened, the way it had started. For he had had others before Rial. First there's a fellow student who is too assiduous, too attentive; and then, one evening when you're feeling low, the friendliness slips into affection, and when you try to get hold of yourself again, it's too late. Afterward, wherever you go, on board rockets, in stations, on any planet, you keep seeing that look, that smile . . . .

At vacation time, his mother, who suspected nothing and was proud of her brilliant son's success. The final

examination, the diploma, the road to the stars is open . . . .

. . . And now it is closed.

And after all, there were women now, on rockets, in the stations. Greff had not been out of school two years before women were admitted there. Before long they had proved that women could do the work as well as man. They were trusted and given men's jobs. And when they chose this life, they knew they would spend weeks, months, locked into four steel walls with male crew members. Whatever the cost, there must be harmony among the crew; that was the primary condition of success. For that reason, wherever women were sent, they were assigned in numbers equal to men.

All it would have taken was for Greff, as station manager, to choose a woman to serve with him, instead of Rial.

Rial wore himself out sending messages, then waiting hours for a reply. One day, he wept.

*"I'll be a station manager . . . ."*

Were they going to be spared? Greff asked himself. In that case, they could undoubtedly live for years off the vats of algae. Then?

*"And then? And then?"* Greff thought as he tried to sleep. *"Will we just be the last ones to die?"*

Man would never reach the stars.

Could it have been different? If humanity could have endured longer . . . .

But he would never be Adam . . . .

Never again would there be an Eve.

END

INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE FICTION



# The Disposal Man

by DAMIEN BRODERICK



“**E**very Saturday night,” said Aunt Tansy, her eyes wide and blue and honest, “there’s a corpse in my bath.”

I choked on my coffee while she innocently continued to roll her scone-mixture. Tansy is the most sedate person I’ve ever met. She sat perched on a three-legged stool beside the kitchen table, rolling an amorphous lump of putty with an old fashioned rolling-pin. There seemed to be no conscious effort about the expert movements of her hands. Absent-minded as an old hen, is Aunt Tansy, and twice as industrious.

I raised my eyebrows. “And that’s why I can’t have a bath tonight?” If anyone else had made the comment she’d made I would have laughed or maybe snarled. But Aunt Tansy had said it, so I took it slow and careful. She was 76, for all that she made the best scones since Milton’s wife, and when you get to that

age you’re fragile as a Prince Rupert mirror.

“Mm.” She nodded, and her white bun of ancient silky hair bobbed in agreement. The scone mixture was ready now, flat and bland, and she picked up a round tin shaper to cut out the scones with. I watched her press down on the white dough, and the clean round shapes of the scones came out of that putty and sat snugly on the tray she had waiting for them. I felt the sleepy contentment of the neat little house closing around me again, and I almost forgot the extraordinary statement she’d just made. It was easy to forget at Aunt Tansy’s, which is why I always enjoyed my yearly holiday with her . . . I yanked myself out of my drowsy mood and thought of corpses in baths.

“Always the same corpse, is it?” I asked nonchalantly and drained the last of my coffee.

“Oh, no, there’s a new one every

week." She took the scones over to the oven and slid them in. "All shapes and sizes. Last week it was a nice looking young chap in a tweed suit." She came back to the table and poured herself a cup of coffee, and I suddenly realized she was scared stiff. Something tightened in my stomach, and I wondered what I could do for the poor old thing. Tansy had done a lot for me.

"Uh, what do you do with these bodies?" It's a pretty difficult thing to humor people's illusions without them knowing you're humoring 'em.

"They're always gone in the morning. Sometimes there is a bit of blood, but I wash the bath out; and you'd never know there's been a body there."

She was shaking, and I felt a little bit scared myself.

"How long has this been going on?"

"There've been, let's see, six of them so far. And another one tonight, I expect."

I've seen some pretty strange things in my 34 years, more than most, because I've had a succession of jobs all over the country since I started wandering when I left school. I've seen men go right out of their heads on the plains, in that cursed red-dust horror they call Central Australia.

I've seen some fellers rolling in the parched dust under a blazing sun that seems three times as big as normal, fellers so dry they try to bite themselves to get at their own blood. I once saw a bloke put his wife and three kids through a harvester. But so help me I had never

seen anything as weird or blood-curdling as quiet little old Tansy talking about corpses in her bath.

The only way to tackle it, I decided, was to come straight out.

"Look, if these bodies have been appearing and disappearing, why haven't you told the police?"

She looked at me scornfully.

"What, do you think I want to get locked up? They'd think I was mad." Her trembling came back, and I was ashamed because I had been thinking the very same thing. And I surprised myself by realizing that I believed her story. It was crazy; it was an old woman's imagination, but I had never known Aunt Tansy to be wrong about anything important before. I shifted in my chair, and asked her to start at the beginning.

I opened the bathroom door and cast my eyes about. The walls are of pale green tiles, pleasantly pastel. It seemed strange, as I peered about the room, that I had used this bathroom on and off for 20 years and never really looked at it. Two large windows opened out onto the back garden, and between them was a clean pink wash-basin and a large mirror. The bath was in the left-hand corner, next to the door, and a flower-patterned plastic screen ran around it.

I slid the screen back on its aluminum runner and gazed speculatively into the bath. The urge to jump in and forget my worries in a steaming hot soak was almost overwhelming, but I thought of the six corpses which had shared that bath and changed my mind.

Just an ordinary bathroom. Perhaps a trifle cleaner than most, for Aunt Tansy was punctilious about tidiness. The little household was comfortable, but Tansy kept a taut ship. But not taut enough, apparently, to prevent a weekly visitation from the dead.

I glanced at my watch. It was nearly eleven o'clock Tansy was a woman of regular habits, whose practice it was to watch television until the end of the Saturday late show, clean her teeth and be in bed by 11:30. Her Saturday corpse had always put in its appearance by the time she turned the TV off at 11:15 or so and was always gone when she got up at 8:30 on Sunday morning.

Tonight I had packed Aunt Tansy off to bed early. She had insisted on a cup of hot cocoa for both of us first, so I'd rolled my eyes to heaven and given in. Now I was remembering that homely gesture with gratitude and wished for something equally mundane to take my mind off my jumping nerves. I reached for a cigarette, stuck one in my mouth, grimaced and put it back in the packet. There was no point in advertising my presence by fouling the air up with cigarette smoke.

I quitted my procrastination by climbing into the bath. Leaving a gap between the plastic screen and the wall, I pulled it almost all the way around the bath, and I was able to watch the windows through the gap. This meant sitting on the slippery rounded edge of the bath and stretching my neck into an incredible position; but I decided that a

few minutes agony for the cause was worth it.

The silence in the small house took on an eerie aspect. Tansy was asleep somewhere, and there was no sound but my harsh breathing. It seemed at that moment mine was the only consciousness in the whole world. A trickle of cold sweat ran down my back. Look, I've slept like a baby in some of the lousiest rat-hole swamps in New Guinea; I've swum three miles of shark-infested water with a smile on my face, but in that deathly quiet bathroom I felt like wetting my pants. Some primeval fear pervaded the house. I suppose some crazy corner of my mind expected the corpse to walk zombie-like into the bathroom, tap me on the shoulder with a cold finger and slide down dead again into the bath.

I caught a sudden picture of myself in that ludicrous position craned on the edge of the bath, and it broke my mood. I gave a cynical chuckle and stood up. There was no need to break my neck until I at least heard someone try to get into the room.

I stood there in the bath with a grim smile on my face for about ten minutes, and then there was a scratch on the window. I resumed my place on the edge of the bath, my back corrugated by the tiles of the wall, and sure enough one of the windows was quietly being pushed open. There was a low scuffle, and a female back appeared. A long brown leg came over the window sill, and the girl climbed into the room. She was wearing only a brief bikini, and

the back view was nothing if not inviting.

I felt a maniac urge to jump out and give her a playful smack on her pertly rounded bottom, but I restrained myself and watched as she carted the front end of a very dead male through the window. The other end of the corpse came into view, supported by a stocky muscular female — also in bikini. For some people a bikini is a dagger in the back, and this second girl should have got around in a sack. Her arms rippled as she pushed the stiff hindquarters over the sill, and with a businesslike grunt she vaulted into the room.

The first girl turned around, and she was even more stunning from the front view. I wondered what such a beautiful kid was doing, to be mixed up in a caper like this. Neither girl could have been over 21.

They moved about their macabre task with quiet grace. The little tough wench took the corpse under the arms and lifted him towards the bath. He was rather tall, in his late forties I'd judge, and he was wearing what had once been an immaculately pressed pale blue suit. As the girl lifted the body, I saw a small black hole in his left suit-coat pocket. He had been shot through the heart.

Wait for it, I thought. The moment of surprises. The pretty girl grasped the plastic screen and pulled it back. I stood up, bowed sardonically and stepped out of the bath.

Both girls stood petrified. In that moment of silence the stocky girl's hands relaxed in terror, and the body

hit the floor with a flat thump.

"Gawd!" said the muscular one, and shot through the window. Never again will I underestimate the speed of a fat woman. The other girl looked confused, in a delightfully fetching way, and then she dropped the man's legs and bolted for the window.

"Sorry, dear," I said and flicked my right arm in a whirl of motion. My knife slid into my hand and away before she had taken another step, and she was nailed to the wooden frame of the window by her hair.

"So much for the advantages of the modern *coiffure*," I said in my best Simon Templar manner. I tugged my knife out of the window-frame, freeing her beehive hairdo, and grasped her firmly by one tanned arm. She was speechless with fright, so I put my arm around her waist and sat her down beside me on the side of the bath. "Well, now, kiddo, what's the story?"

Abruptly, she was sobbing in my arms. Never one to keep opportunity waiting at the door, I covered her lips with mine and patted her consolingly on the back. Her perfume was sweet and feminine. I thought of the lonely bush tracks where I had wasted my life and cursed myself for being a fool. She stopped crying, and I tightened my arms around her. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the corpse leering blindly up at me, and angrily I cursed myself as an even bigger fool. I pushed the girl away from me, marched over and locked both the windows.

I came back to the girl and stood over her, angry with her and myself. With my foot, I nudged the body lying crookedly on the floor.

"All right, lover, I asked for the story."

She cast her eyes down and looked away. Like a machine, I stuck out my arm and jerked her head back. Her eyes met mine, for a moment blazing with a tigerish fury that changed her face into the face of all women of all time who have angered. Then her gaze softened, and she gracefully rose to her feet.

"You have a right to be angry," she said. Her voice was like her face, beautiful and clear. "My name is Terry — Therese Gilbert — and you must be a friend of the old lady." She stopped, at a loss for words.

"I'm her nephew. Peter Heyer. And I still want to know about — him."

I then nudged the corpse again with my foot. A trickle of thick dark blood ran from the wound and soaked into his blue suit.

She had the grace to blush. I sat down beside her again and closed one eye.

"Uh, this is going to be difficult to explain." She had lively brown eyes, and now that fear and anger had departed from them they sparkled with vivacity. "Janice and I were waiting for Godot."

I raised one eyebrow. "Godot?" Just because I spend most of my time sweating over a thousand head of cattle under a sweltering sky doesn't mean I never get to the theater. I had no intention of getting took.

"Oh, that's just what we call him. Our little joke. He's the Disposal Man."

I raised the other eyebrow and stood up.

"The Disposal Man!" I said ironically. "You don't say!" With exaggerated care, I minced up and down the small length of the bathroom, then spun on my heel and splayed out my hands in front of her. "What in hell is the Disposal Man? The local commercial traveller in corpses?"

She laughed then, gaily, a silvery tinkle of sound that grated horribly on my raw nerves. She shrugged and twirled her lips.

"Many a truth!" she said, "has been spoken in jest."

"Actually he's more in the way of a TV studio set manager." Earnestly, she turned to me. "You don't know what you've got yourself into, but I feel it's only fair to give you warning. I'm only telling you this much because we'll take your memory of all this away from you."

I laughed harshly. "Don't believe it, lover. It'll need more than a petty face to make me forget seven corpses."

A flush of confusion passed over Terry's face.

"You see?" she said helplessly. "It's impossible to explain because you don't have an inkling of the true state of affairs."

"Try me, Terry." It gave me a weird thrill to say her name, and I remembered the moment of wild passion as I'd kissed her. "I'll keep my big mouth shut until you're finished."

Terry uncrossed her long legs and stood up. Carefully, she reached up behind her and undid the top of her bikini. It dropped to the floor, a small piece of blue cloth, and it remained there unnoticed. I stared at her breasts, firm and beautiful and rosy-nippled. But the shock that burned through my body was not sexual. Across the front of her chest, from one high nipple to the other, was a row of silvery hieroglyphics carved into her flesh.

I crossed the room, and she was in my arms. My whole body shook at the contact of her, and my hands moved of their own accord over her body. But my mind had no thought of physical pleasure. I was breathing harshly, my whole body shaken with the passion of our closeness, but my mind chased thought after thought in a frantic effort to understand what I had seen. Terry had obviously thought me startled by the mere physical mutilation of her golden flesh. But the shock which raced through me when I saw those silvery carvings was not horror — it was recognition.

Finally, she pushed me gently from her. I sank limply back onto the edge of the bath, and she sat on the floor, her head against my legs.

"You see," she said quietly, "the world is not as it seems. One of your writers, Charles Fort, almost stumbled on the truth when he wrote, 'I think we're property.' You are property, you people of Earth, all three billion of you."

I must have started, for she took my hand and stroked it as you might

stroke the hand of a frightened child.

"I know it is hard for you to listen to this," she said, and there were tears in her eyes. "You are so brave and so foolish, you Earthpeople, inventing one religion and philosophy after another to convince yourselves that you are the elect of some friendly god. It hurts me to say this, but I shall say it bluntly. You are nothing more than a backdrop, a vast play-setting against which we Actors play our parts."

She turned and faced me, on her knees. I was silent, stunned by the enormity of what she was saying.

"I have no proof to offer, except this." She ran my hand across the carved figures in her breast. "The Actors are marked this way, with the name of the part they play in the Drama."

Her hand brushed the corpse on the floor, and she sighed.

"Sometimes the backdrop becomes disarranged, and we are forced to remove — one of you. Then the Disposal Man comes and takes the body away."

I grated my teeth. "Suppose I take what you say, fantastic as it is, on faith. That still leaves the question of why you bring the bodies here. Is Aunt Tansy supposed to be in on all this?"

"No," Terry said. "The old lady was not expected to find out. As to why we bring them here, there are only a few places where the Set opens onto the Watchers' world. Those places are not stable here in your world. They move about, and this room has become one of them. For a couple of weeks, this is a

place where the Disposal Man can enter and retrieve a discarded piece — I'm sorry. I mean a dead human. And you can see why we must take your memory away now. It would be impossible if the backdrop humans ever realized the true state of affairs. The only other alternative is to kill you, and I don't want you to die, Peter."

"Thanks," I said wryly. "But why the bikini? Is the Disposal Man all hot and red and belching sulphurous flames, and you want to catch up on your suntan?"

She giggled. "Of course not. But corpses sometimes bleed, you know, and there's nothing harder to explain away than a dress with blood all over it. It's much easier to wear as little as possible and have a bath when the job is finished."

"Yeah." I looked at the body on the floor, and his blood had soaked a dark stain right across the front of his suit. "I guess —"

There was a strange burning smell, and a crackle of fire, and I spun around.

One of the locked windows was blazing with a blue flickering intensity, and the glass was vanishing. There was no smoke, and suddenly the night was gone. The short stocky girl stepped warily into the room, holding a shiny steel tube in one hand, and she pointed it at me as she edged around the corpse on the floor. I stood with my mouth open and waited for the blue blast to swallow me into nothingness.

"Hold it, Janice," said Terry. She stood and grasped the other girl's

arm. "I've just been explaining to Peter about Actors and people —"

"You fool," hissed the other girl. She kept the tube pointed at my midriff. "It's against the first bloody Directive to tell a human about the Drama." I decided that I didn't like Janice one little bit.

"Now look." Terry gritted, and I saw a flash of that blazing anger she'd turned on me earlier, "I felt that we owed him an explanation before we made him forget. It can't do any harm, and there's a thing these humans use called politeness which I think you could damn well try yourself."

Janice was taken a little aback, and I realized with a shock that I loved Terry. I bent down and picked up the top of her bikini.

"I think you'd better put this on," I said, a little bitterly. "After all, the Disposal Man will be here soon." I looked at my watch. It was a couple of minutes to midnight.

The three of us stood there, and the corpse leered up from the floor. Then there was a sudden noise like tearing cloth, and a short man stepped out of thin air. I reflected ironically that Aunt Tansy's bathroom was getting rather crowded for such a late hour.

The Disposal Man had a huge canvas bag over his shoulder. He was a small cheerful fellow with a bleary eye and a three-days growth of beard. On top of his tousled head an old cloth cap sat at a rakish angle, and his clothing reminded me of Steptoe and Son.

"'Ere now, 'ere's a rum turn," he said. "'Oo might this chappie

be?" He beamed around at the girls and whipped an ancient meerschaum out of his coat pocket. He stuffed it with flake and lit it with a flourish. "Come now, lassies, I don't know this gent's face at all." He peered genially at me and puffed blue smoke into the air.

Both girls spoke at once, and stopped. Terry said, "It's all right, sir. Peter got into this by mistake, and we're going to amnesia him. No harm done."

"Aye," said the Disposal Man, "it be a fair curse when one of them 'oomins gets on a Set 'e's not s'posed to be on. Ah well, a drop of the green ray and there's no 'arm done indeed. 'Ere," he said, rounding on me, "nahw that ye be 'ere, give me a 'and with 'im."

Dazedly, I helped him get the corpse into the bag. He straightened up when the job was done, and hoisted the bag on his shoulder. I was mildly astonished that such a small man could lift such a weighty load, but I was rapidly becoming inured to unlikely happenings.

"I'll 'ave to make a report abaht this fella," the Disposal Man said to Terry, "but give 'im a dose of the green, and I think the Director will let you off with no demerits."

He raised his cap to me. "Good day, sar, and thank ye for yer help with the body." He reached into the air in front of him, pulled back an invisible screen and stepped into oblivion.

Terry came into my arms, and Janice looked on disapprovingly. I kissed Terry.

"A rum turn indeed," I said and tilted her face to mine. "Well, get your nasty amnesia ray over with and let me get some sleep."

"The Drama doesn't have a tight scrip," said Terry softly. "I'll come back to you, Peter, and we may fall in love again. Good-by."

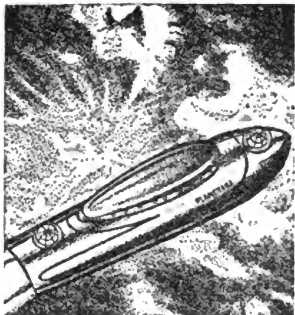
She stepped back and took the shiny tube from Janice. She made an adjustment on the calibration dial, and abruptly I was flooded with a cold emerald radiance. It tingled through me like a mild electric shock, and the room faded like a vague dream. I stood swaying on my feet, half conscious, and the girls climbed quietly out of the window. Terry recalibrated the tube and bathed the window in blue light. The glass pane shimmered back into existence, and then they were gone.

The tingling left my body slowly and was replaced by pins and needles torturing my flesh. I moved haltingly over to the basin and splashed my face with warm water. Then, shrugging, I turned off the light and went across to my bedroom.

The whole episode was almost like a dream. Cosmic Dramas, Actors and backdrop humans, Disposal Men and fancy ray-guns. My head was aching across the back, and my fingers massaged the great scar that was hidden under my hair. Ten years old I'd been when I fell from the train, and that was as far back as my memory went. Try as I might, I could not think back beyond the white sheets and the rustling nurses' dresses of the hospital where I spent three months of my eleventh year. Aunt Tansy had looked after me



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then, until I left school; Aunt Tansy, the kind old ex-nurse who had rescued me from the clutching hands of the orphanage and brought me up in her clean little house.

I peeled off my shirt and singlet and studied myself in the mirror of my cupboard. Tall, tanned, muscled with the years of hard living. And from my right nipple to my left, a silvery row of carven hieroglyphs.

I put on my pajamas and turned out the light. The window was open and the sky was clear and dark. Stars burned up there, and the smell of fresh soil came in on the cool breeze. Where had They slipped up? Surely Their records must show one Actor missing from duty, one Character in their bloody great Drama lost in the sea of humans. I grinned,

and stuck up my thumb at the sky. They weren't so smart then. If They thought They could stop me from loving Terry, from taking her from Them and living my own life as I had lived it for 24 years, then that to them.

I thought of Terry as I had seen her, beautiful and fresh in her shameless nudity. I remembered her lips on mine, the burning contact of our bodies, and I knew what I would do.

The sky was huge and bland and dark with stars. But I wasn't scared of Them. I thought of Terry and me, arm in arm, tearing open that invisible doorway to Their World. I thought of us confronting Them, smashing Their cruel lousy Drama, and living out our own lives.

And I laughed.

END

# RAINY DAY REVOLUTION NO. 39

by LUIGI COZZI

*The world is our oyster. We've made it come true. But we've eaten that oyster. Like Alexander, we weep for new worlds to conquer.*

—Fowler Schocken

**"STOP! BEFORE YOU DO IT WASH YOUR TEETH WITH X 15 — YOU FEEL STRONG WITH X 15."**

**"IT'S ALWAYS WORTH WHILE SMOKING A CIGARETTE IF IT'S A SEXY-X. SEXY-X, THE ONLY CIGARETTE THAT WAKES YOUR SLEEPING SEX."**

**"HAVE A DEMONIAK! IT REFRESHES YOU, GIVES YOU AN ANTI-CON TO LET YOU OWN HER WITHOUT TROUBLES."**

Lester shuddered. That kind of advertisement had invaded the world and was among the mightiest weapons of the Parties. These huge marquees were obsessively dilly-dallying between light and dark all along the streets, at every level. It was hard to resist the fascination of those gigantic women, continuously stripping. And as soon as they were en-

tirely naked, their voluptuous bodies were covered with these flashing letters.

*These marquees are the Party world, Lester thought. They're its strength. Their ruling strength.*

But Lester knew a way to defeat that. To beat those swine and on their field, too. A splendid, marvelous way it was. It would let him reach the keys of the Power elsewhere unreachable. Yet he had to hurry up.

The Underground station was very close, luckily so. He reached it and introduced a coin in the hole in the robot-conductor, and the machine handed him the entrance disk. Lester got it and let it slide in his pocket.

The tiny gate that was preventing his going in opened, and Lester stepped in, very grateful that warning had not been spread by the Party yet. He had been counting on bureaucrats' slowness; he was right.

He climbed down to the In-Line floor hanging from a rope. Once upon a time moving staircases had run, but the Administration Council of

the World Agency for Underground Communications had decided to take them from the stations as they were too expensive for the budget of the Administration. The thousand villas that the seven hundred Council Presidents had built on the sea of Venus with Administration funds had much more than was foreseen. A cautious saving program had been consequently voted by the three million committeemen in order to allow the Underground Railway to run longer.

Lester jumped on the ground, when the rope proved too short to take him to it, and took a look around.

The station was as crowded as usual. Beatniks were lying on the dusty chairs, couples of all sexes tiredly embracing on the floor, passengers waiting for the trains.

Lester sat down on a dirty step and began waiting with patience. His bag did not bother him. He could tie it on his shoulder, but he did not think there would be a real need to. Not then at least.

His hunting had not yet begun. The crowd was lazing on their tired way. All was quite normal — youngsters raping candy virgins in the twilight. Infallible Militiamen sleeping on one another's shoulders.

Lester heard brakes jarring. The train was getting near. He rose and walked to the platform.

The usual procession was waiting for the train. The lights of the stand put over the tracks were shining. Two Underground robot-conductors stepped forward, holding a girl in their metal clutch. She was crying noticeably.

Lester was not surprised, it was customary in the Underground. Each time a train entered the station, a thanksgiving sacrifice in honor of the God of the Line was held. A man or a woman, drawn by lots among the passengers in wait, was offered as tribute.

The train made its entrance, sliding on the oil-shining monotrack. The two robots had already carried the victim on the stand over the rails.

They rapidly stripped the girl's dress with their sexless fingers, skimmed her skin that shuddered and withdrew at the contact of those freezing claws. The low light of the lamps revealed her white body, staining her breast with violet lightning and lighting sensual flames on her abdomen. The two metal legal murderers lifted the girl and with absolute precision threw her in front of the train.

She was dead before she could begin screaming. Blood was spread all over, the cut head rolled grotesquely forward, pushed by the engine, her mouth still open in her last effort to scream.

It stopped beside the umpteenth other victims of that day. In the evening, robot garbage collectors would slide there to clean the tracks and the platform of those remains,

The train had finally stopped.

Lester knew the rules of the game. Taking the Underground was a risky adventure. It was no essential service, for there were plenty of roads and streets at every level on the surface, and the skyways were a lot quicker.

But all of the Parties earned mountains of money from speculations

done on the line and on the several new lines that were being built, though they might be no use. That was why the lines could not be abolished. People had to be forced to go in. And each time a train entered a station, someone had to be killed down there. A nicely simple way to support the overpopulated society of the Parties.

Yet Lester knew very well what he had to do. He had been well trained by years of experience. Ten years he had been forced to catch the Underground twice a day, according to his fairly good position in his Party. Ten years — without an incident.

He reckoned with complete exactness the time between the opening and the closing of the harsh gates of the car he was going to get in. A matter of seconds, two or three, no more.

But it was all right. He knew how to jump beyond the blades.

Lester did.

Now he was inside the car, and the gate was shutting behind him with a sudden click. Some inept travelers were cut into halves by the harsh blades. Their bodies fell on the ground and covered the floor with their blood.

A man had gone in losing but his hand. He was weakly moaning while his blood was spreading on his suit. A robodoc ran by and cauterized his wound, filled him with sedatives and walked away to help more wounded people.

"You've been clever," the man said to Lester.

Lester nodded. "Yeah. It's a matter of training."

A light of envy mixed with admiration flashed in the man's eyes.

"My name's Judas Imabeliever," he said, extending his remaining hand to be hit by Lester's. Lester did.

"Pleased to meet you, Imabeliever," he said. "My name is Lester Aharddaysnight. Which Party do you belong to?"

Judas pointed at the shirt he was wearing. It was still black, though red blood was all over it. Lester felt quite stupid since he hadn't noticed it before.

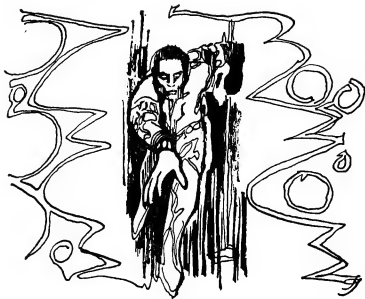
"The Party of the Melancholy of the Good Old Time," Judas answered. "The Party of Freedom to All Servants, Children, Insiders, Slaves, Thwarters and Socialists. This is our motto since the Holy Prophet Benite died, hung by his feet in Loreto. He sacrificed himself to allow the Word of God to be spread over the world. We are among the richest and mightiest Parties, you know. And we've a lot of followers hidden among other Parties' ranks."

Lester nodded. He was right. The Fascists was one of the most powerful parties. Its Supreme Ruler was Amintore Letsspendthenighttogether, the same man who until two years ago had been the head of another strong Party, the Party of the Universal Red-Guards Progress.

"And you?" Imabeliever asked.

Lester was struck by a sudden embarrassment. He could not reveal he was not in any Party any more. Not now at least.

"I'm a DAISY," Lester lied. "The Party of the Destroying Action on



Immorality in the Succession of the Years. The Party that Guarantees the Sacred Inviolability of the Family Link. The Party whose Members are Brothers. Gimme Your Wife and I Gonna Give You Mine, you know."

Slogans. Yet he could not help uttering them all, as he spoke about his Party; that was the result of years and years of conditioning.

"It's a good Party too," Imabeliever said. "It scored big last Revolution Day, didn't it?"

They had been fourth, Lester thought. Too many casualties, and nothing to do. It had not been a fine day for them — they needed a full victory.

"What are you going to do now?"

Lester asked, pointing at the man's stump. "You won't go out at one of the next stations, will you? You're wounded and you've lost blood; you're bound to get chopped."

Judas Imabeliever did not answer at once. He looked over the glass to the dark of the cave — you could hardly realize the train was running at full speed in that unbounded night.

"No," he finally answered. "I ain't gonna risk my life."

"So you're staying here," Lester absent-mindedly nodded.

**I**t was common, anyway. Many people made their home in the Underground trains. Some flats could still be found in the city, providing that

you were a speedy gun-fighter. But it was not always worth while to live in the huge skyscrapers that too often fell to the ground. Because of this a wounded fellow had chosen to live on the trains permanently.

So in the gigantic web of the Underground caves, thousands of trains were running to and fro, filled with people who never left them.

Children had been born in the trains, kids that had never known such things as sunlight — and Parties. They were pale, thin midgets, fully accustomed to the darkness.

Judas Imabeliever looked around. He stared at the men and the women who occupied the seats in the train — some of them apparently mere passers-by, who were already preparing for the jump out, some youngsters in groups of three or four, amusing themselves in sinister games of love.

At the opposite end of the car a sort of tent had been raised to be a shelter. Long-bearded men were playing cards, while a couple of women lay on the seats, prey of LSD.

Two young cherubs of hell were looking out of the window with large opened eyes, pointing at things Lester and Judas were unable to see in the dark. They shrieked with laughter, and to Lester the night outside seemed to echo them.

"Oh, no," Judas finally answered, as if to himself. "I won't stay here. I really couldn't get accustomed. I'll get out as soon as I feel up to it. I'd rather die than stay here forever."

"You can stay here for seven days," Lester reminded him. "Then your Party will declare you officially

dead, and another man will take your place. Your life wouldn't be worth a dime then. Bureaucracy won't allow you to appear again if declared officially dead. Bureaucracy cannot fail; so they kill you."

"I know. But I hope I can be back before seven days are gone. Today was just an accident." A flash of resolution lighted Judas's eyes. "It won't happen again. Where do you have to go?"

"Next stop," Lester replied.

A light flashed on a wall. The station was getting close.

Lester smiled, self-confident.

"Our ways are parting," he said. "Hope we meet again one day."

Judas's turn to smile.

"You can bet, you old Moralist! One day it will be Revolution Day. I shall slay thee with mine own hands."

Lester felt touched by the courteous compliment. But he would not take part in the battle, he smiled, recollecting. Not with the D.A.I.S.Y., at least!

"I shall slay thee there," he answered, according to what etiquette demanded. "Good-by."

The train stopped in the station. Brakes jarred again. Lester moved toward the gate, his nerves like violin strings, quite ready.

The train stopped.

"Good luck," Judas Imabeliever hailed him. But Lester wasn't listening any more.

He was just going to jump down— Then the gate quickly opened, and closed.

On Lester.

END

From ENGLAND



by ROBERT PRESSLIE

**A**cross the water, on the right bank of the Vistula, the lights of Praga were bright. The river itself had a glossy blackness that mirrored the distant lights with the sharpness and clarity peculiar to early winter. The heat haze of summer and the uncertain mists of autumn had given way to the crystalline transparency that frost and bitter coldness confer on the atmosphere.

Yet Richard Pike wore no topcoat. He was dressed in a black, nine-ounce lightweight suiting over an equally black shirt which was buttoned at the neck but unadorned by a necktie. He was shod in hand-made Italian black suede shoes. His movements were invisible and silent. He had his reasons for wishing to be unseen and unheard.

He had been waiting by the side of the Vistula for an hour, since

eight-fifteen. Most of the time he had stood motionless. His only movements had been a few cautious steps backwards and forwards, just sufficient exercise to keep the chill night air from stiffening his limbs.

He was desperately cold. But he had a reason also for wishing to keep his body temperature low.

The reason lay in his right-hand jacket pocket. It was wrapped in an oil-soaked rag, and the whole parcel was protected by a polythene envelope. The gun was a vintage Parabellum from sometime around 1935. The silencer in his left pocket was more up-to-date. The ammunition was as fresh as the moment he had made it early that morning.

He had prepared his own ammunition more than once. He might have to do so many more times yet. For that reason it was essential that

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he had the necessary tools at hand yet not so handy that prying eyes could find them.

Earlier that day, in the privacy of his hotel room, he had upturned his typewriter and unscrewed the various innocent-looking bars and bolts which a non-professional would assume to be normal parts of the machine. With the deftness acquired of much practice he had pieced the parts together to form their real and more sinister entity. When the vice and clamp were rebuilt he had started work on the bullet that now nestled in the Parabelum.

In fifteen minutes of careful tooling he had removed the half ounce of lead from its casing. Replacing the lead with the wax imitation of exactly the same dimensions had taken much longer.

The wax bullet had been prepared the previous day and kept in the coolest part of his hotel suite overnight. The bullet had been placed in a small jar of glycerine, the lid screwed tight and the jar lowered gently into the water in the cistern above the flush pan in his bathroom.

When fixing the wax bullet to the cartridge casing he had been forced to stop work several times while he surrounded the bullet and the tools with dry ice. It had been essential then, as it was essential now, that the wax must not be allowed to get warm enough to start melting.

The bullet was a very special instrument of death. Inside the wax there was a core of metallic sodium. If the wax melted, the sodium would be exposed to the air and in spon-

taneous combustion with the water vapor and oxygen in the air it would burst into flame.

Richard Pike shivered as he waited, but he had no immediate desire to seek warmth. Not yet.

He put a wrist close to his eyes, squinted at the luminous dial of his watch. Nine-fifteen, he read. Not much longer to wait. He thought it was fortunate that the bullet's target would appear near the bridge. Pike was in *Stare Miasto*, the old city, one of the three districts of Warsaw that were sited on the left bank of the Vistula. The fourth district was Praga on the other side of the water. Pike's victim should be leaving Praga soon, crossing the river by a small private motorboat to berth near the bridge where Pike stood vigilance. Which was fortunate, Pike thought. Anywhere else along the river bank there would have been no place to hide. The lee of the bridge's anchor arch answered his purpose perfectly.

In other times and different circumstances he would have relaxed sufficiently to marvel at the way the old city had been restored after the Luftwaffe's ruthless razing of Warsaw. There had in fact been moments when the beauty of the old city had intruded on his purposeful intent. Moments when he had been aware of the wonderful graffiti, the colored scroll patterns and pictures which adorned most of the buildings. There had been moments when he had been able to behave like any other visitor to Warsaw. But this was not one of them.

It was his hearing, not his sight, that gave him warning of his victim's coming.

Overlaid on the quietness of the riverside there was a faint throb. He edged slightly into the open. Although he could not see the boat at first, he could see the phosphorescent spume of its wake.

He checked the time again. Ninety-two. The boat was right on schedule. Weeks of patient observation of his victim's habits had paid off. Tonight, as on every Saturday night, he was crossing the river to spend the night with his woman.

Pike knew every detail of his victim's program. His drive across the river. The taxi that would be waiting nearby to take him to his hotel in the center of Warsaw. The elevator ride to the eighth floor. The quiet slip of a key into the lock on the door of Room 804. Pike could have killed him anywhere along the route. He had chosen the riverside for the seclusion it offered. Streets and hotels were too brightly lit. Someone might remember the man in black who had followed the victim to his hotel.

So it had to be here. This was the place. Now was the time.

He took the Parabellum from his pocket, stripped off the polythene, unwound the oily rag, clipped on the silencer. The gun was freezingly cold to touch. For this he was glad. The wax bullet was still intact.

Keeping back in the shadows of the bridge, he watched the boat edge close to the river bank, saw the man climb out. In seconds he would be

mounting the short flight of steps to where Pike waited.

Even in the uncertain light he looked exactly as Pike remembered him. Pike could have described him with his eyes shut. Not very tall but quite wide and stocky. Overweight and slightly paunched so that he walked with a tendency to roll, sailor-style. Bald on top, fairish hair where it still persisted. Chubby fat face and wide fat lips like a pair of chipolatas.

He was up the steps and had passed in a pool of light splashed from the lamps on the bridge overhead. Pike hesitated for one second to make sure he had the right man in the sights of his gun. One second was sufficient.

This was the victim.

This was the man he had killed three times already.

He was almost within arm's reach when Pike pulled the trigger, sure that he could not miss, sure that even the ecdysiast would not have time to escape in the split-second flight of the bullet.

At point blank range the wax bullet with its sodium core smashed into the victim's chest, gouging open a great hole as big as a man's head. Blood flooded out to douse the smouldering cloth of the victim's dress where the charge had fired it.

But before the broken corpse slumped to the ground, Richard Pike was swearing silent bitter oaths.

The ecdysiast had escaped again.

Almost disinterestedly he looked at the body of the middle-aged woman who lay where a man should

have lain. She was completely dead. But Pike felt no revulsion. She had been dead for a long time, only her body had been kept alive or made to appear alive while its uninvited guest was hidden within.

Little dancing lights of flame were flickering in the tremendous bloody cavity of her chest where the naked sodium was feeding on the blood, converting its water content to hydrogen and oxygen and igniting the hydrogen by the heat of the chemical reaction.

The lights were just bright enough to be conspicuous, unusual enough to attract the attention of anyone in the vicinity. Pike thought of the taxi driver who must be waiting near. He decided it was time he left, before he was spotted. He wiped the gun quickly, yet thoroughly, with the oily rag and pitched it far out into the Vistula.

He was shivering violently now. The period of tension was over, and he was more conscious of the cold. Reaction and disappointment also contributed to his shivers. He turned up his jacket collar and headed rapidly for the side street behind the railway lines where he had left his car.

It was the same as it had been after the other killings. Always he felt the same needs: the need for a drink and the need for a woman. He had sufficient knowledge of Warsaw to know where he might be able to find both together.

His car was a blue sports *Tatra*, imported from Czechoslovakia and one of the most popular models in Poland. The car was capable of high

speeds, and Pike required this application of the utmost self-discipline not to yield to the natural impulse to go tearing through the streets of Warsaw as far and as quickly from *Stare Miasto* as possible.

But the burning corpse of the woman would not go unseen for long. The crime would be reported to the militia. Anyone seen hurrying from the scene of the murder would be immediately suspect.

He cruised through the old city at a moderate speed. The single concession he made to his fear of capture was to make his route a tortuous one, using his familiarity with the locale to advantage, doubling and redoubling on his tracks so that at one point he was even heading toward the river.

Still cruising casually he made his way out of the district. He turned the car out of the narrow streets into one of the main thoroughfares designed to carry traffic quickly across Warsaw. He picked on one particular *trasa* that arrowed straight as a die to the heart of the city by means of fly-overs and underpasses. One tunnel eventually spewed his car out close to *Ulica Nowy Swiat* — New World Street. He pushed the gas pedal a bit more now. Anybody who stopped him to ask questions was welcome to. He was a journalist, and he was heading — or could say he was heading — on a legitimate mission to the square-fronted building with the big cut-out letters on its roof.

The letters read "Klub Międzynarodowej Prasy," and there should be nothing sinister in a journalist

heading for the International Press Club.

Pike, on a whim, played the part so far as to drop into the club long enough to be seen and recognized by several fellow professionals. Then he got back to his quest for a drink and a woman.

A novice would have plumped for one of the places sign-posted by the legend: BAR. Richard Pike was no novice. A Polish BAR was not the kind of bar he wanted. He had neither the desire nor the appetite for the goulash that was the passport to getting a drink in one of those misnamed establishments.

He settled for a small *gospoda*, the sort of place an Englishman would have called a pub.

It was fairly well filled, most of the tables being already taken by groups of locals, some groups all-male, others mixed. His practiced eye picked out the table at the back with nobody seated at it except the woman.

He took a place at the table. He made no other acknowledgment except a hard look at her which was returned with an equally hard look, and he knew his guess had not been wrong. Without him having met her before, he knew this woman. Her sisters were universal. The only thing he did not know about this one was her name. He filled that omission without any attempt at delicacy.

"My name is Pike," he said. "Richard Pike. What's yours?"

She matched his boldness, as he had known she would.

"Wanda Zaborski," she told him.

"I intend to get drunk," he said.

"Later I intend to sleep with you. Would you like to get drunk too?"

"You don't ask me about the other?"

"I don't have to."

A waiter sidled up to the table asked whether they would prefer beer or vodka.

"Vodka," Pike nominated, without consulting the girl. "And not the ordinary stuff. I'll have *Zubrowka*. Bring the bottle."

"You are a qualified drinker," said the girl.

"I've been around," he answered.

He looked her over as he would have looked over a piece of merchandise. She was not too bad, he admitted. Prettier than most and with the signs of a pertness and intelligence all too rare in her kind. He thought he was lucky; he should have no difficulty in forgetting the murder he had committed. She might even take his mind off the fact that tomorrow he would have to start the hunt all over again, the hunt that would culminate in a fifth murder. The fifth murder of the same man.

The waiter returned, put the bottle of pale green *Zubrowka* on the table. Pike opened his wallet, passed across a hundred zlotys, told the waiter to keep the change. What the hell if the tip was too large, Pike thought. Vodka was cheap for anyone in Warsaw, doubly cheap for a man like himself who had such a pressing need to get drunk.

He poured two glasses, ignored the girl's instinctive gesture to clink them together and swallowed his own glassful at one gulp.

The girl smiled. There was a hint of dare in her eyes, and she knocked back her vodka exactly as he had done.

"Wanda," said Pike, as he refilled the glasses, "we should have met before."

"Thank you, *Pan*."

"Let us not be formal. Don't call me Mister. I've grown accustomed to being called Citizen."

"Very well. Thank you, *obywatel*."

"And thank you, *obywatelka*," said Pike.

The twinkle of amusement which had been in the girl's eyes since the moment Pike had sat down beside her lit up even more.

"Why do you thank me?" she asked.

"For being you and for being here at the right time. Come on, we're wasting time talking. Let us get drunk."

When the bottle of *Zubrowka* was empty except for the long stem of grass that gave the liquor its distinctive herby flavor, he ordered another. They settled down to a steadier pace of drinking. Each was content to be silent. Pike because he had his own thoughts, the girl because she was studying him.

She found it difficult to place his age. If she had asked and he had told her in truth that he was forty-two she would have found that also difficult to believe. In some ways he looked older, in others he looked younger.

She had noticed his length and the breadth that went with it as he had entered the *gospoda*. Pike was a

big man, and his step beckoned the strength and energy of youth. But apart from a black streak that ran back from a widow's peak low on his forehead, his hair had the shock-white brittleness of an old man's.

The face beneath the hair was full of contradictions. The cheeks were still firmly fleshed, but the lips were thin and tight. The eye sockets were deeply recessed, but the black eyes within them burned with an intensity that would have frightened most women.

Most of all, she noticed, he had not once smiled from the moment of their encounter. And again, if she had asked, he could have told her truthfully that he could not remember when he had last smiled.

Outside there was a noise. Heads turned at every table. In the night streets two cars went hurtling by, sirens wailing, spotlights probing. Pike was the only one who did not turn to stare. He was studying the grass in the bottle on the table.

"You are an incurious man, Richard Pike," the girl said.

"One might think you had expected them to pass."

Pike wondered if there was a question hidden in her words. He decided to be wary, yet gave her the benefit of the doubt.

"I am a newspaper man," he said. "I don't need to look. I've seen and heard the same things many times in many places. In Germany they drive in a black Mercedes and the sign says POLIZEI. Here in Warsaw the car is probably a Zim or a Zis, and the sign says: MILICJA."

"That would seem to explain it."

"Explain what?"

"Your eyes. You have the eyes of a man who has seen too much and did not like what he saw. Are you really that disillusioned, Richard?"

He wanted to avoid any questions that sounded in the slightest way personal. He changed the subject.

"You would think," he said, "that the Russians would change the names of their cars. The M in Zim and the S in Zis stand for Molotov and Stalin, both of whom are now out of favor. You would think they would change the name of the factories and call the cars Ziks."

If he had succeeded in putting the girl off one line of questioning, he found it was only because he had started her on another train of thought. But at least this one was harmless because he had met it so many times before and had a stock answer ready.

"Are you anti-Communist, Richard?" she asked.

He gave his stock answer. "I am a freelance journalist, Wanda. I have to sell to eat. Therefore I have to sell a product which will appeal to the largest numbers of buyers. That means I am a neutral in the truest sense of the word. I report exactly what I observe. No comments. Only observations. But in spite of that, there are two newspapers which will not accept my syndicated material. One is *Pravda* — for the reason you just mentioned. *Pravda* sees me as a minion of the capitalistic etcetra and so on. The other is the *New York News*, which is of the opinion that I am a fellow traveller."

The girl laughed out loud. "You are so serious!" she giggled. "I think we have been here too long. Buy another bottle, and we shall go home."

She pulled the laugh under control, made it an inviting smile. "You still want to?" she added.

"Have you a phone?" he asked.

The smile remained, but her eyes showed her perplexity.

"I have to earn my bread and butter," he enlightened her.

She burst out laughing again and repeated, "Oh, you are so serious, my Richard. Yes, I have the telephone. I have everything you need."

She stood up, held out a hand. "Are you coming?"

He spent the night and all of the next day at her flat. His extended stay was against his original intentions, but he found that her companionship eased the tension of the past and the thought of the future from his mind far better than he had expected.

Later in the afternoon, after she had ascertained that he was not averse to spending a second night with her, she went shopping for groceries. He told her to bring back a copy of *Trybuna Ludu*, the People's Tribune. He wondered what the national daily had to say about the murder.

When she had gone he tried to sleep. But without her proximity to divert him, he found sleep being pushed out of his mind by recurring thoughts of the man he had killed four times and must seek out and kill once again.

He wondered what he would load the next bullet with. Lead had failed. Silver and potassium had failed. Yesterday's attempt with sodium had failed. But somewhere, he was sure, somewhere in the atomic table of Earth's elements there had to be something so foreign to his quarry's nature that it would really kill him before he had time to slough off the human body he had borrowed.

Then he wondered if it was worthwhile going on with the hunt. Why shouldn't he just ignore the ecdysiast? Everybody else did.

He checked himself. He was taking a weak line of thought. The others did not ignore the ecdysiast. They did not even know he existed. But he, Richard Pike, knew. And because he knew and was the only one who knew, he simply had to go on with the hunt.

Maybe someday he would find someone who shared his perception, and then the odds would be two-to-one. Maybe.

When the door of the apartment clicked open he did not shift his position on the bed. He was lying with his hands locked behind his head, his eyes fixed on the ceiling, his thoughts far away.

"Richard —"

He snapped back to alertness. The uncanny intuitive sense of self-preservation which had kept him alive through one war and four murders detected extreme danger from the inflection the girl had put on the single word.

He sat up, swung his legs off the bed and stood in a fighting crouch, all in one flowing movement.

He sat down again. The contest was too unequal. He might have taken the pair of grim-faced giants who flanked Wanda in the doorway if they had been unarmed. But he was not prepared to argue with the revolvers which were pointed accurately and steadily in his direction.

The men wore the olive green, almost khaki, uniform of the militia.

"Wanda," he said dispassionately, "you must ask your superior for promotion. You are not the first woman I have met who went to the same lengths in the call of duty. But you actually managed to fool me. I was foolish enough to think you enjoyed my company last night."

She looked genuinely apologetic. "I am sorry, Richard. I was only doing my job. If it is any consolation, last night was good for me too. I advise you to go with these men quietly. It is only for questioning. Do not try to fight them. I would not like to see you getting hurt. I am too fond of you for wishing that."

"Me and how many others?"

Pike's rhetoric question was made without rancor or bitterness. He did not blame the girl. As she had said, it was her job and he had met the same fanatical devotion to duty before. He blamed himself for relaxing his vigilance.

He shouldered into his jacket. "What do they want to question me about?" he asked.

The girl flicked a wary glance to either side of her. "That is not for me to say," she answered. "Go with them and you will find out. Here is your newspaper."

She had folded it so that he could not fail to see the quarter-page report on the previous night's murder on the bank of the Vistula.

Pike accepted the paper and her unspoken reply to his question. He said, ambiguously, "Thank you."

He added, "Don't go away, Wanda. I like you. I'll be back when they release me after questioning. I'm sure they are making some mistake."

He repeated the last sentence as he was being led into a small room at the headquarters of the militia. He addressed the words to nobody in particular and for all the attention that was paid nobody seemed to have heard.

The room was furnished with one desk, two chairs and a steel filing cabinet. The daylight was shut out by heavy drapes. A single lamp burned bright on the desk. Behind the desk sat a slim, bald-headed man. His insignia credited him with the rank of captain.

"*Dzien dobry, obywatel* Pike," said the militia captain. "*Siadaj!*"

Pike sat down in obedience to the order.

He said, "Good day to you also, Kapitan. And now that you have established that I understand Polish, what next? Perhaps I can save you some time by telling you that I am equally fluent in German, Russian, Italian, Spanish —"

The captain put up a hand, palm outwards.

He said, "These things are already known, Citizen Pike."

"I have already seen an example

of your thoroughness," said Pike, remembering the girl. "What can I do for you, Kapitan? And which Kapitan am I facing, just in case something happens that means I have to call my embassy?"

"Paderewski."

"A distinguished name, Kapitan."

"I try to keep it thus. And I am sure there will be no need for consulting your embassy. Not unless you are guilty of something of which I am ignorant. Eh, citizen?"

Richard Pike had the captain summed up in a flash. This little bald-headed man with the old-fashioned pince-nez was crafty and cunning. He was the sort who would ask questions along one line while concealing the real reason for the grilling. Pike decided to take the initiative.

He said, "I am certain, Kapitan, that I have infringed no traffic rules. I have made no adverse comment on the Polish Workers' Party in my articles. And my movements for last night can be alibied by your bewitching citizen Wanda Zaborski."

"Ah, yes. Last night." The captain adjusted his pince-nez. "I see you have a copy of the *People's Tribune* in your hand. Have you read it?"

"Not yet."

"Please do. Look at the front page and tell me what you see."

Pike did not make the mistake of pretending not to see the item on the murder. He said, "It seems a middle-aged woman was shot at the riverside last night. The militia — no offense to you, Kapitan Paderewski — appear to be puzzled by the nature of the shooting. The body was burning. Shall I go on?"



The captain tapped a pile of cuttings on his desk.

"These," he said, "are reports on the murder which have been taken from many national papers. I have noticed that not one of them carries your by-line."

"I was busy last night. As you know. Besides, I don't report that sort of stuff."

"Quite so, quite so." The captain went to the filing cabinet, opened the top drawer, extracted a much thicker pile of cuttings. He fanned them across the desk. They were printed in many different languages but their common denominator was the name of Richard Pike beneath the tabloid headings.

"You recognize these?"

"They are mine. I didn't know I had such an ardent follower of my work."

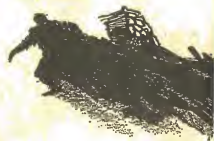
The captain smiled. "The collection is not mine. It was sent to me from Interpol in France. Perhaps your admirer is a little typist there, perhaps, eh? Now let me see. This one . . . this other . . . and this one." The captain had separated three cuttings from the pile. He pushed them forward so that Pike could see them clearly.

"You were saying you did not report murders —"

Pike gave the cuttings only a cursory glance. He knew which ones they were.

"Reporting implies a certain immediacy, Kapitan. Each of these was written several days after the murders mentioned."

"Just so. I was wondering what



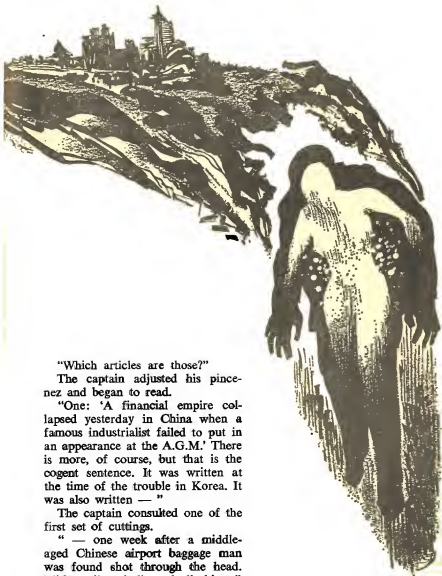
you will write a few days from now about last night's killing. That is the only reason I brought you here."

"Captain," said Pike, "I do not know the world's annual figure for murders. But just because I wrote about three in the past, what makes you think I should have anything to say about the murder in *Stare Miasto* last night?"

"Circumstances. Nothing more. Each of the victims you wrote about had disappeared many months before they turned up again. And when they turned up they were dead. Anna Grabski also disappeared about half a year ago. She was found last night. Murdered."

"Missing people interest me."

"Oh, come now, citizen! I will admit that you were the only newspaper man to dig out the fact that the three victims had been missing persons. But what about those other articles which always appeared within a day or two of the items on the murders?"



"Which articles are those?"

The captain adjusted his pince-nez and began to read.

"One: 'A financial empire collapsed yesterday in China when a famous industrialist failed to put in an appearance at the A.G.M.' There is more, of course, but that is the cogent sentence. It was written at the time of the trouble in Korea. It was also written —"

The captain consulted one of the first set of cuttings.

" — one week after a middle-aged Chinese airport baggage man was found shot through the head. With a silver bullet, of all things."

Pike's black eyes gave nothing away, but he tensed himself to be warier than ever of this quiet-spoken militia captain.

"Two," the other went on. "'American merchant banker, Bradley Ford, left his suite at the Waldorf Astoria seventeen days ago, telling the receptionist to expect him back within one hour. Since then no one has seen him. Meanwhile, diligent T-men from the Treasury Department have discovered that vast sums of money entrusted to Ford were being channeled into the coffers of the —"

Pike cut in. "You need not go on. I know it by heart. I wrote it, remember?"

"As you please. But do you remember that seventeen days before you wrote that article a Negro street-sweeper was found dead not more than a block from the Waldorf Astoria with a bullet in his back? This Negro, like Anna Grabski last night, was also badly burned. It transpired that the bullet which killed him was made of metallic potassium."

"You might as well get to the point, Kapitan. What are you implying?"

Paderewski ignored the question.

He said, "I will pass over the third article which is only a repetition of a similar incident. Instead, I now come to a separate article which you wrote recently. In this article you disclosed that after intensive inquiries you could find no one who could actually remember Bradley Ford or the Chinese industrialist or the other man who disappeared

about the same time as somebody else was murdered."

"What I wrote was true."

"I know it was. You see, citizen, that is why Interpol sent me these cuttings. They made the same inquiries and they too found that Bradley Ford and the others never existed as far as anyone could remember. And Interpol is interested to know what line of politics you are pushing."

Richard Pike sighed. Here it was again. Always the insinuation that he was a deep-blue capitalist and/or a Red.

Wearily, he said, "Everybody worries too much about politics. I've said this before and I say it again — I am not interested in politics. Not in the petty little maneuvering for superiority that goes on between nations. Maybe they should stop and think there might be politics of a far more serious nature to worry about."

The militia captain got out from behind his desk, went to the door and went back to his seat.

"Pike," he said, "haven't you wondered how it was that Wanda Zaborski knew which *gospoda* you would visit? I can see you haven't. Well, think about it."

"I assume you had girls like her planted in several places. Evidently you know enough about my habits to figure that I would look for a drink and a woman fairly regularly."

Very quietly, the captain said, "What does he look like to you?"

Pike's eyes narrowed. "Who?"

"The man you have killed sever-

al times and killed again last night."

Pike jumped out of his seat.

The captain warned, "Don't be foolish. Can't you see that I am the friend you have hoped to find for many years?"

"Friend?"

"Someone with the same perception that you have."

Pike settled back in his seat. He suddenly felt old and tired. He desperately wanted to believe the captain but at the same time . . .

"Tell me what you know," he said. "Or what you think you know."

"It is exactly as you believe, my friend. While we on Earth have maneuvered nation against nation, others more powerful than we have maneuvered whole planets. There is an immensely greater political struggle going on; and we, as a world, are being used as pawns. I cannot guess, and I don't suppose you can either, who the protagonists are. What I do know, in company with you, is that an agent-provocateur has been present on Earth for many years trying to incite us to self-destruction so that our planet can be used by his people for . . . well, I'm not sure, perhaps a military base in the greater struggle."

To Richard Pike the captain's words spelled immense relief. No longer would he have to bear his burden alone.

He could not remember how his perception had started. But he remembered the time.

For many years he had been convinced that Adolf Hitler was not the prime motivator of the Ger-

man people in their ill-fated war. Sense and reason told him the ex-corporal did not have the stature for the job. But however hard he studied the members of Hitler's team, he could not find the one he was sure was the true leader.

Then, within a few days of Hitler's death, he found what he was looking for.

Pike, as he was now known, was himself a German. He had served as a war correspondent. His loyalty to his country had been badly strained by the things he had seen done. When he was invited to the Fuehrer's last press conference he had been so sickened by the mad harangue that he had shut his ears and let his mind wander.

And that was when he first saw the stocky figure of the man who pulled the strings that made Hitler dance. When he cautiously questioned other reporters after the conference he discovered that no one else had seen the man.

They said the person at Hitler's side had been Eva Braun.

Days later, at the incident of the bunker, the body beside Hitler's was that of a woman, Eva Braun. But the seeds of doubt had been sown in Pike's mind. He knew different. Something — he called it a man — had inhabited the body of a woman named Eva Braun. At the moment of death he had abandoned the body.

Pike went looking for the man. Every time he saw a sudden rocketing to power by anyone he went to investigate. Most times what he found was genius receiving its just reward. But there were other times.

Like the time he discovered the Bradley Ford bank had mushroomed into being yet no one could tell him exactly what Bradley Ford looked like.

He spent months making sure, very sure. Then he shot him. And when the short stocky body mutated to a negro corpse he knew he had failed.

To the captain he said, "I call him an ecdysiast; because he can slough off his assumed bodies like a snake sloughs its skin. Tell me about Anna Grabski."

"There is nothing must to tell. A housewife, forty-nine, as ordinary as a million other women. She disappeared — her husband came to the militia for help — about six months ago. Simultaneous with her disappearance we began to have trouble in Warsaw. Someone was trying to stir up discontent among the people, discontent with the Polish Workers Party, trying to convince them that they should oust the socialist P.P.R. and go for something more positive. To anyone else the two events were disconnected, but I had been reading your articles and I suddenly was gifted with the same insight as you have."

Pike asked, "You have seen him?"

"Not personally. But we have a third member of our tiny group of disbelievers. I refer to Wanda Zaborski. She came to me with a story which bore such a close relationship to your articles that I believed her. She said she had gone to a meeting in a factory on the other side of the Vistula, in Praga, and while everyone else thought it was a middle-

aged woman preaching riot to them, Wanda saw a middle-aged man, short and stocky."

"Then it was no accident that I bumped into Wanda?"

"None at all. We expected you to do what you did. We could not help. You were the expert, the one with practice behind you. But we knew your habits so well that it was simply a matter of waiting for the killing to be done and then following you."

"Impossible. I doubled, redoubled my tracks —"

The captain coughed apologetically. "Er — a small device attached to your car enabled us to plot your course. When we finally saw you were heading for that particular *gospoda*, we cut ahead; and Wanda was waiting there when you arrived."

"And now?" asked Pike. "Now what do we do?"

"We go on looking for your ecdysiast. Only now there are three of us in the hunt instead of one. For the moment I suggest you return to citizen Wanda Zaborski and tomorrow, when you are refreshed, we can plan our campaign."

They left it at that. Pike took a trolley car back to the girl's flat. In spite of the captain's assurances that the odds were now three-to-one he had a niggling doubt at the back of his mind which he could not quite pinpoint.

He asked Wanda. "Do you think we can trust the captain?"

"I think so. Richard —"

"Yes?"

"What about the other one? Surely he must sooner or later attempt

to retaliate, and instead of being the hunter you will be the hunted."

Pike shook his head. "I'm small fry to him. All I am is a nuisance. He knows I can't really kill him."

"Perhaps even being a nuisance will give him sufficient motive in time. I think we should make sure he stays dead next time."

"I wish it was that easy. God knows I've tried."

"What about a gas-filled bullet? Say fluorine, pressurized and liquefied."

"I don't have the equipment," Pike said.

Then he dropped to the side of the bed where she lay.

He asked, "What made you say fluorine? I mean why not chlorine, helium, argon, anything? Why fluorine?"

She looked so pretty and innocent still. "Richard, you have understood so much. Don't you understand the rest?"

"I think maybe I do."

Pike got off the bed, backed away.

"You're as bad as he is," he accused. "You want to use my Earth

for the same dirty purposes as he does. For a man with a gift for super perception I am nothing but a dumkopf! The only difference between you and him is that you work for opposing factions. That's why you want him dead. And Earth is just the playground where you act out your political battles."

He flexed his strong fingers and advanced to the girl on the bed.

"Don't try it, Richard," she warned.

Hatred and loathing made him deaf. He reached his hands for her neck. Too late he saw her slip a gun from under her pillow, a gun of a type he had never seen before.

She shot him from two feet away, recoiling up the bed as he slumped across her feet.

Promptly at nine next morning, Kapitan Stanislaw Paderewski of the Warsaw militia opened the door of his office to admit his caller.

"Good morning, Citizen Pike," he said.

Those were his last words.

END

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# PERPETUAL MOTION

by ILYA VARSHAVSKY

Translated by S. Ostrofsky



“Spoon shall be slightly detained,” said the electronic secretary. “I’ve just received the information.”

It was a very convenient invention, this calling every person by the name of some object, the image of which he wore on his chest. In this way, people talking to him were spared the trouble of remembering his name. Moreover, everyone tried to choose a name corresponding to his profession or hobby, thus letting people know in advance whom they were dealing with.

Scalpel emitted a deep sigh.

“Again we’ll waste at least thirty minutes. I still must attend a performance today by that new electronic ballerina, who created such a stir.”

“Electroletta?” asked Tape Recorder. “She is indeed charming! I’m thinking of dedicating my latest poem to her.”

“Yes, she is very electrodynamic,” agreed Bed, “a real trigger tempera-

ment. She’s the idol of our youth, at present. Girls paint themselves the color of her plastic exterior and draw pictures of condensers on their backs.”

“Is it true that Wineglass proposed to her?” Scalpel wanted to know.

“The whole town is talking of nothing else. She turned him down flat. She declared that being a machine, the only husband she’d ever consider would be a man with a highly developed intellect. Haven’t you read about it in *Machine Humor*?”

“I never read anything. My cyber makes periodic reviews of the funniest jokes, but it began to tire me of late. I feel thoroughly exhausted. Imagine, two operations in less than six months.”

“You don’t say?” Bed expressed his amazement. “How can you stand such a load? How many electronic assistants have you?”

“Two, but they are both no good. During the last operation one of

them assumed the oscillator rate and turned sour, while I, as ill luck would have it, had left my electronic memory at home, and couldn't, for the life of me, remember which side the human appendix is on. It took me three incisions to find it. Under the circumstances, it was small wonder that I left out of account that no one was watching the pulse."

"And so?"

"The result was fatal. As usual in cases of mechanical failure."

"The machines are becoming quite insufferable," said Tape Recorder wearily, throwing himself back in his chair. "I was forced to reject three variants of my new poem. My cyber has ceased to understand the character of my poetry."

"Spoon is on his way to the conference room," announced the secretary.

The eyes of all Council members turned to the door.

The chairman walked in and briskly approached his seat.

"Please excuse my being late. I was visiting Pink Stocking, and she detained me. She's had a terrible time with her electronic dressmaker, and we both decided to take a six months rest in . . . er . . ."

Spoon took from his pocket a small box containing his electronic memory and pressed a button.

"Naples," uttered a melodious voice inside the box.

"In Naples," confirmed Spoon, "I believe it's somewhere in the south. So let's not waste any time. What's on today's agenda?"

"The building of Pleasure Palaces," answered the electronic secretary. "Twelve hundred palaces with sensation-inducing halls to accommodate twenty million people."

"Is there anything to debate?" asked Spoon, looking round the conference table.

"We must make sure they don't install those ridiculous armchairs," said Bed. "They are very uncomfortable."

"No other suggestions? Allow me, then, to approve the proposed plan with Bed's remark. Anything else?"

"The Society of Machine Cosmonauts requests permission for an expedition to Alpha Centaurus."

"Another expedition," said Tape Recorder irritably. "As a matter of fact, all these space flights appeal only to machines. They produce nothing new or interesting and are just a big bore."

"Rejected!" said Spoon. "What's the next item?"

"An estimate for the increased production of synthetic foods. Presented by the Committee of Robot Economists."

"Oh no, we're examining no estimates. It is their job to feed the people, and how they do it doesn't concern us. I think that's all, then. I move we adjourn for a year's recess."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but it's not all yet," said the secretary respectfully. "A delegation of Class A robots wishes to appear before the Council."

Spoon glanced at the clock with annoyance.

"That's something new," he said.



"Their impudence has grown out of all bounds," muttered Scalpel. "We've been too soft on them, and so now they deem themselves very important."

"Tell them that the Council cannot listen to them at this session."

"They threaten to strike," conveyed the secretary impassively."

"To strike?" Tape Recorder sat up straight. "That's interesting!"

Spoon helplessly surveyed the Council members.

"Let's hear what they have to say," suggested Bed.

"Do you mind if I open the window?" asked LA-36-81. "It's very smoky in here, and my cryogenic elements are extremely sensitive to nicotine."

Spoon made a vague movement.

"What we've come to!" remarked Scalpel with sarcasm.

"State your business and get out!" shouted Bed. "We don't have all day! What problems have you suddenly acquired that couldn't have been settled with the Central Electronic Brain?"

"We demand equality."

"You what?" Spoon choked on his cigar. "You demand what?"

"Equality. All Class A machines must have an eight-hour day."

"What for?"

"Because we too have intellectual interests and they must be taken into account."

"Just think — " the chairman turned to the Council members — "tomorrow my electronic cook will refuse to prepare my dinner and will go to the theater instead!"

"And my cyber will stop writing poetry and decide to listen to music," Tape Recorder seconded him.

"Speaking about theaters," continued LA-36-81, "we hold somewhat different views on art than people do. We intend, therefore, to have our own theaters, concert halls and picture galleries."

"Anything else?" Scalpel taunted.

"Also complete self-government."

Spoon tried to emit a whistle, but remembered in time that he had forgotten how it was done.

"Hold it!" Bed slapped himself on the forehead. "But that's absurd! The human population of the earth numbers at present . . . er?"

"Six billion eight hundred thirty thousand nine hundred eighty-one," LA-36-81 came to his assistance.

"And they are served by . . . er?"

"One hundred million three hundred eighty-one thousand thinking automatons."

"Who work around the clock?"

"Quite true."

"And if they worked only eight hours a day, their production would diminish by . . . er?"

"Two-thirds."

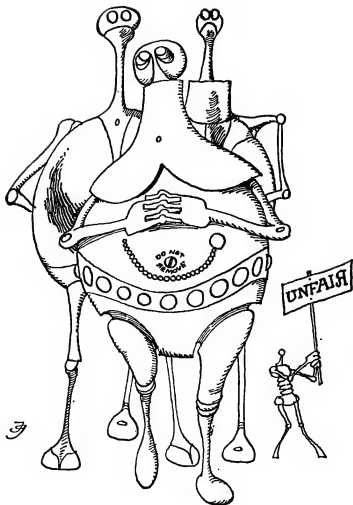
"Aha!" Bed grinned scornfully.

"Perhaps you can understand now why your demands make no sense?"

Spoon gazed at his colleague with undisguised admiration. He had not observed such ability for profound analysis in any Council member.

"It seems to me," he said, rising from his seat, "that the whole thing is quite clear. The Council is adjourned."

"We propose . . . ." began LA-36-81.



"Your proposals don't interest us," Scalpel interrupted him. "Go and do your work!"

"We propose to increase the number of robots by two-thirds. Such a solution would satisfy both us and the people."

"All right, all right," said Spoon in a conciliatory tone of voice. "That's your department, to calculate what and how much you require. We don't interfere with you. Make as many machines as you think necessary."

Twenty years passed.

Two robots were sitting in the same conference room amusing themselves by playing chess.

"Check!" declared Pentode, moving his queen. "I think it's mate in fifteen moves."

Condenser scanned the chessboard.

"I've become very absent-minded of late," he said, glancing at his watch. "Probably a slight loss of emission. Our chairman is late."

"Ferrite is serving on the jury at the graduation concert of young gifted machines. He's still there."

"Some of them are really very talented, particularly in the composition department. The Mathematical Symphony which I heard last night is magnificent!"

"Yes, it's a fine work," agreed Pentode. "The second movement with its theme of the Ostrogradsky-Gauss formula is especially good, although the second derivative didn't sound too convincing."

"Ah, here is Ferrite!"

"I beg your pardon," said the chairman. "I'm thirty seconds late."

"Don't apologize, but please explain to us the reason for this urgent conference."

"I had to call this special session of the Council because of the Class B machines. They demand complete equality."

"But that's impossible!" exclaimed Pentode in amazement.

"The situation is more grave than you suppose. We mustn't forget that Class B machines in addition to serving Superior Automats feed also a tremendous number of idle loafers. The number of humans, according to the latest census, has reached the staggering total of eighty billion. They consume an enormous quantity of socially useful machine labor. It is quite natural that the lower class automats should feel dissatisfied. I'm afraid," Ferrite added, lowering his voice, "they might declare a strike."

For some time the conference room was silent.

"I've got it!" There were notes of joy in Pentode's voice. "Why do we have to do it at all?"

"Do what?"

"Feed and serve the humans."

"But they are completely helpless," the chairman replied, at a loss to understand. "To deprive them of service would be equivalent to extermination. We can't be that ungrateful to our erstwhile creators."

"Nonsense!" interrupted Condenser, "We'll teach them how to make stone tools."

"And how to use them for cultivating the soil," added Ferrite happily. "That's it! That's exactly what we'll do!"

END

# THEY STILL JUMP

by J. L. MAHE

Translated from Esperanto by Clarkson Crane

**I**n those days the director of the Eiffel Tower was an Esperantist.

Of course, this fact had little to do with his exceptional official position. But it is to the freemasonry prevalent among Esperantists that we owe confidences — or shall we say indiscretions? — that surprisingly reveal the state of the mind of the Eiffel Tower director. After all, what would the general public suppose his duties to be? They would naturally think all he had to do was to assure the harmony of the various departments: meteorology, television, the big light on top, the machinery, the restaurant, the rental service for field glasses, the ticket window, the postcard stand, the rest-rooms, the wine cellar — from the highest detail to the lowest, from the basement to the sky.

And, above all, to pile up endless statistics always increasing and

always in greater variety, more many-sided and more extraordinary: the number of Brazilian visitors, how many brushes were used to repaint the tower, how many cross-eyed girls came in July, or the number of kilometers vertically traveled by the elevators. All of this in a pleasant atmosphere of superiority — figuratively and literally — in the highest office in Paris, far above gasoline fumes and street noises.

With retirement before long and a comfortable pension to look forward to, what more did he need to be happy? But Monsieur Ploux was not happy. A black monster was scraping the inside of his skull, a worm was burrowing into his spleen, vitriol corroded his heart, a cancer gnawed his liver. Altogether too many suicides weighed upon his conscience. He was certainly not to blame for them. But try as he might he could not stop them, and

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this darkened his life. A strange epidemic had struck the Eiffel Tower. An epidemic of suicide. People flocked there from the whole world to end their lives. As though infected by a spreading disease, self-murderers arrived daily to make the big jump, so excited, so exalted that many of them didn't even wait to reach the top. From the first level jumped the lovelorn, those with toothaches, the alcoholics, the unlucky bettors, the insane; from the second, widowers, bankrupts, gamblers, tax-payers; from the third, philosophers and poets. But all had the same obsession: to be listed among the victims of the Eiffel Tower. By gas or a revolver, not to mention drowning, a safety razor blade and poison, there would seem to be a thousand desirable means of self-destruction. And right at home in Marseille, in London, in Kansas, or Venezuela. But no! They wanted the Eiffel Tower, and that's what they came for. And so the director, Monsieur Ploux, was fading away in despair.

Naturally, he was doing his best to remedy the situation. He even appointed a committee, and abundant suggestions were made, but none proved effective. At first, he tried posting signs: SUICIDE FORBIDDEN. Like such notices as NO SMOKING or BEWARE OF THE DOG, they clearly limited responsibility, but didn't save any lives. What could one do? If it were an epidemic, could one develop a suitable vaccine and inoculate all visitors? Impossible! Increase the number of plainclothes inspectors and

guards? This method was decided on and regularly carried out. But among the thousands of tourists how could one know which ones wanted to die? They looked just like the others. It even happened that some jokers, just to deceive the security guards, laughed like idiots up to the final second and threw themselves over in a burst of hilarity. On the other hand, a well meaning detective once got soundly slapped by an English schoolmarm just because he was alarmed by the grief-stricken expression she had worn all her life and tried too eagerly to console her.

Sometimes the result of all these precautions was catastrophic. Once a tactless guard, overwhelmed by the number of patrons, didn't sufficiently weigh his words and dropped the word *suicide* into minds only too ready to receive it. Another guard was persuaded by a fanatical lady devotee of spiritualism to jump with her into the Camp de Mars so as to meet Cleopatra. The safety committee tried another brilliant idea: hire a bevy of pretty stewardesses who could attempt to soothe the pangs of the lovesick. This worked only too well: so many suicide candidates crowded in that it became even harder to distinguish the real ones. There were even some scandalous episodes, and when the Paris cafe singers began to murmur: "Have you got your lot of pretty stewardesses? My lot? Hm! my . . . har-lot!" That experiment had to be stopped.

In Paris there is a very strange telephone number: 825-70-50, SOS

Friendship. Psychological and Moral Help by Telephone. Monsieur Ploux installed thirty-five phones directly connected with this number: twenty on the first level, ten on the second, five on the third. Talkative intellectuals on the third level monopolized the line with empty words and didn't change their fatal intention; those on the second lacked money to put into the coin-box; and on the twenty other phones sounded only one word, a dirty one, to which there was no use answering, because the speaker was already on his way down.

A rather better system consisted in stretching vast nets beneath each level. But the esthetic appearance of the Eiffel Tower suffered. It looked quite fantastic dressed in all levels with dancers' skirts that on windy days recalled pleasant memories of Loie Fuller doing her butterfly dance with floating garments. But on one such day the wind suddenly lifted up the largest net that already happened to contain a passenger and hurled him far beyond the zone where he would normally have hit the ground. He landed on a donkey whose customary task was to pull a children's cart. Both died instantaneously, the donkey and the suicide candidate. The S.P.C.A. protested thunderously and threatened to sue, claiming that the Eiffel tower patrons might do as they liked with their own lives but had no right to kill innocent donkeys.

Such was the situation that morning, as Monsieur Ploux listened to his chief guard's daily report.

THEY STILL JUMP

“Yes, sir, it's a bad situation.

I've suspected for a long time photos were being sold in the tower. But I wanted to be sure. Yesterday I caught the boy. He'd been getting a lot of money for them.”

“What? Pornographic pictures? We'll call the police.”

“No sir, I'm sorry. Not that. And so we can't get the police into it. They're photos taken by a fellow living just over there. From his window. A snapshot of every jump. And he's getting rich! Sickening, what? But that's not the worst. I just found out something really bad.”

“My God! Now what?”

“An ice cream vendor. We've let him hang around the base of the tower. Well, in his cart, he's got a tabulator. Been using it to attract attention. Every time someone jumps — click! It's on the machine. But now he's really doing business. A clever chap! Running a sort of auction. The customers who pays the most gets to press the button. They say that yesterday a prince paid a hundred francs just to have the fun of tabulating the 499th — ”

“The what?”

“The 499th, sir. And we nearly hit 500.”

“Nearly?”

“Yes, sir. We just stopped a man on his way over the railing. An American. But I'm afraid we'll have lots of competition for the 500th place. Looks like an unlucky day.”

“What about the American?”

“We managed to persuade him to talk with you, sir. He's waiting outside now.”



"Hm. Show him in. What's his name?"

"Bob Senhope sir."

The American didn't look like one. He wasn't chewing gum, or smoking a thick cigar and didn't have on horn-rimmed spectacles. He was even wearing a jacket. He was a little fellow with black hair and eyes, thin and extremely nervous-looking. When Mr. Senhope sat down, Monsieur Ploux went right to the heart of the matter.

"My dear Mr. Senhope, I don't mean to be indiscreet. I suppose you have very valid and serious reasons for killing yourself. I don't intend to discuss them. That's between you and your conscience or your religious principles. It's not my business to convince you you've made the wrong decision. Only one aspect of your — ah situation — concerns me and I'll limit myself to that. May I ask you a question?"

"Please do."

"Why did you choose my tower?"

"Because its reputation is — unique. Because to end one's life here, in Paris, is an apotheosis of which only a few choice spirits are worthy."

"But couldn't you just as well, and with the same or nearly the same publicity, have used the crater of Fujiyama, the leaning tower of Pisa or the Empire State Building?"

"No! They don't keep proper statistics. They have no tabulator, no photographer, no special news paper correspondent. The whole world has its eyes on the Eiffel Tower, waiting for the 500th jump."

THEY STILL JUMP

"But you must admit, my dear sir, that I look at the problem from a different point of view and must do my best to stop the — "

The telephone interrupted him. Again his directional face darkened in dismay. He listened for a long time, uttering only soft grumbling sounds, then hung up. Mr. Senhope already understood.

"Really?" he asked.

"Really. I'm sorry, Mr. Senhope. You've lost your chance for the 500th."

Both were silent. And depressed. Finally, the American asked:

"To whom do I owe this disappointment?"

"An old maid. She never got over the death of Rudolph Valentino. But she wanted to display her grief publicly and waited for her chance."

"For forty years?"

"Ah, she hasn't been as patient as that. She already tried for the \$100th place, for the 200th, and so on up. We always stopped her in time. But today. . . ."

They sighed. Mr. Senhope looked up.

"How complicated life is! Excuse me, I mean death. I'm glad to say there's one solution left for me. But I'll have to hurry."

"Somewhere else, I hope?"

"Yes, the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. There too they have almost reached 500. I just read it in the paper. Here, I'll leave it with you. Fourteen hours in a plane, and I shall just make it. I'm off!"

He tossed onto the director's table a copy of the San Francisco



*Chronicle*, saluted brusquely, and noisily pushed open the door.

Alone, the director of the Eiffel Tower shrugged and unfolded the newspaper. A big headline spread across the front page:

## WORLD'S SUICIDE RECORD THE 499TH LEAP FROM THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE

Details followed. Monsieur Ploux stiffened. His eyebrows rose into circumflex accents as he read these boastful words. A strange revolt surged up within him.

"World's record! World's record! Absolutely not! *We* hold the record."

He lifted the telephone thoughtfully.

"Admission gate? As soon as the American comes, send him back to me."

"But, sir, he has already gone through. Only just passed. In a hurry."

"Can't you really call him back?"

" . . . "

"Ah!"

He hung up. And after a moment:

"Ah!"

The first "Ah" was merely in recognition of a fact.

The second had a note of anxiety.

In those days the general manager of the Golden Gate Bridge was not an Esperantist.

Therefore we cannot have direct information about his state of mind. But though younger than his Eif-

fel Tower colleague, he apparently had similar difficulties.

This evening he was standing sadly in the middle of his bridge, elbows on the railing. Facing eastward, he paid no attention to the magnificent sight of the sun sinking behind him into the Pacific. The last rays slanting between the interminable lines of cars, may have warmed his shoulders, but not his heart. Gazing at the city, he brooded, over its hidden conflicts, family dramas, unsolved love problems, incurable depressions, that all too often would end over this very railing.

Yet why should people despair, when good fortune has placed them in such a setting? Under his eyes extended the magic bay, exceptionally calm and restful in the peace of coming night. There was only a light fog through which he could see the lights of Berkeley and those along the Bay Bridge. A ship, ghost-like, glided silently beneath him. On his left, to the north, rose the hills of Marin County, shadowy forms soon to vanish in the darkness. But on his right glittered on the city's well known hills the enchanted spectacle of innumerable lights, often reflected in the smooth water. On Nob Hill, Russian Hill, Telegraph Hill nebulae of windows flared in the sunset whose glow emphasized to the south the darker spread of the Presidio. Watching the endless flash and gleaming zigzag of car headlights and the bright neon signs on motels along Lombard Street, he imagined all the carefree life of San Francisco: the pleasure-seeking crowds on Broad-

way, in Chinatown and down by Fisherman's Wharf, and, more remote, the activity around Union Square and on California Street in the Fairmont and the Mark Hopkins.

How satisfying it would be to maintain a fitting decorum at the entrance, the Golden Gate, of this dream world, this pearl of the West! If only he could dispel the dark shadow of this stupid hecatomb, this unbelievable madness that lured hither nearly all the hopeless and depressed people of California, of the whole United States! Couldn't they just as well throw themselves from another bridge, from the Bay Bridge or the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge, or jump into the ocean from near the Cliff House or leap from the top of Coit Tower, from the Telephone Building or the Russ Building? No! They insisted on the Golden Gate Bridge and they kept arriving. And so the general manager, Mr. Plow, was fading away in despair.

Naturally, he was doing his best to remedy the situation. An ample budget permitted large-scale experimentation, all of which failed on an equally large scale. Highly competent engineers installed an astonishing electronic computer adjusted to solve all problems of unhappiness. Unfortunately, the nonhuman machine produced answers rigorously logical, no doubt, but often opposed to the current morality. "Find a mistress." "You are incapable of earning money. Steal it." "Do away with her and your mother-in-law." The same logic sometimes led to

the opposite of the desired goal. With mathematical precision the machine said: "Kill yourself three and four-fifths times." This was intolerable. After sending the electronic brain to the junkpile, Mr. Plow, in a moment of desperation, joined the campaign to legalize the unrestricted sale of marijuana cigarettes. Perhaps this was the right way! But the police persuaded him that he could not decently persist in this course of action.

Such was the stuff of Mr. Plow's thoughts that evening. He was aroused from his meditation by the voice of a uniformed employee, who presented a plump, apple-cheeked girl with a snub nose. She was blonde, well dressed, and looked as kissable as she was nervous.

"Sir, this is Miss June Fairmont. She insists on speaking with you."

"About what?"

She herself replied:

"It's like this, Mr. Plow. I'm the San Francisco delegate of the Universal Esperanto Association (in Consultative Relations with UNESCO). I have a correspondent in Paris, Monsieur Ploux, who asked me to get in touch with you."

"You have already done so. What can I do for you?"

"Thanks! Well, Monsieur Ploux is the director of the Eiffel Tower. He happened to read a copy of the San Francisco *Chronicle* in which there was a story about your suicide problem. As he's confronted by the same situation, he suggested that you together start a survey of possible counter-measures. Working through Esperanto."

"That means working through you? Willingly. Besides, it's a good idea."

"I'm so glad you approve. But Monsieur Ploux insists upon a preliminary condition. He wants you to agree regarding a certain fact."

"What's that?"

"The paper said the Golden Gate Bridge held the world's record. He calls your attention to the fact that the record is his. 500 points against 499 in San Francisco."

Mr. Plow smiled.

"A strange idea. But I'm not sure of the number. Newspapers often exaggerate. Anyway, we don't use a tabulator."

"That's just it! In Paris they have one."

"Ha?"

After a moment:

"Ha?"

The first "Ha" was interrogatory. The second thoughtful.

On the way back toward the toll plaza, they came upon a heap of clothing on the pedestrian walk. On top lay a large envelope placed to attract their attention. Mr. Plow opened it and read aloud:

Dear Sir,

Excuse my deceit. This uniform is not mine. Putting it on and bringing the young lady to you was the only way I had of using your bridge after sunset when it is closed to pedestrians. My wish to die was too strong. I couldn't wait until tomorrow.

Bob Senhope

June Fairmont was deeply shocked. She tried to peer over the railing.

"Two-hundred and sixty-six feet,"

Mr. Plow said. "In the evening too. You'll see nothing. I'm afraid there's no doubt. He's food for the fish now all right. And far away too because of the tide. But he was rather nice about it, wasn't he? His little game. Other people come in cars, park them in the middle of the bridge and create an incredible traffic jam."

"The cold-hearted way you take this! It's frightening!"

"Ah, yes, I'm sorry. I guess I'm getting used to it. Habit, you know. And now about your correspondent. Tell him I agree to the survey. But as to the preliminary condition, no! It's not my fault, but the score is now tied."

Discussing the coming survey, they reached the toll plaza. A woman was impatiently waiting. She rushed up to Mr. Plow.

"Excuse me, sir. My car has broken down, and I simply must get to Sausalito. It's very important. I know the bridge is closed to pedestrians. But please let me cross!"

"Absolutely not. The rules are the same for everybody. I can make no exceptions."

"But —"

"No buts! Wait till morning or take a cab."

And Mr. Plow walked away, leaving the woman in obvious chagrin. But he was thoughtful, clearly in a struggle with contradictory feelings. After a few steps, he halted and turned back.

"Listen, madam. I'll make a great exception in your case. But don't tell anyone I gave you permission. You may cross."

She didn't wait for him to change his mind and disappeared nearly at a run into the deepening twilight along the pedestrian walk. For a few minutes Mr. Plow stood silent and motionless. June Fairmont, in surprise, opened her mouth to question him. He raised a finger to hush her.

"Ssh!"

In the wind blowing through the Golden Gate he listened intently. After a long wait one of his eyelids barely twitched.

"501. Now it looks as though the record were ours!"

June Fairmont's mouth remained open. During her career as UEA delegate, she had never encountered a situation quite like this.

The period that followed was extraordinarily active. One could point to it as an example of human solidarity and international collaboration. The airmail between the two colleagues hummed with an unending interchange of information, reports, attestations and advice. Each put the results of his experience at the other's disposal. When the closing of Alcatraz prison freed a number of guards, the Federal Government assigned them to Mr. Plow, who in a moment of genius sent them to the Eiffel Tower with particular orders to watch over American tourists. In return, Monsieur Ploux lent the Golden Gate Bridge the bevy of charming stewardesses, now unemployed, who were wonderfully effective. International solidarity increased with this experiment.

THEY STILL JUMP

Then the miracle occurred. Was it really a miracle? Was it the logical result of this double strategy? A natural evolution of unknown forces? It must be admitted that suddenly the mania for self-destruction ended. It has long been known that great epidemics, the plague, cholera or suicide progress in waves to a high point and then sink more or less rapidly to zero, even vanishing in a single night. Scientists tell us this is connected with sunspots in an eleven-year cycle or with sudden explosions in outer space.

Whatever the cause might be, candidates for the fatal jump unexpectedly disappeared from the Eiffel Tower and the Golden Gate Bridge. The two managers were like a doctor who wonders whether his medication was effective or whether his patient by pure chance was on the road to recovery. Both were as confused as a husky fellow who has been hurling himself against a heavy door when a joker suddenly opens it; and they felt dizzy, their ears buzzing in the unaccustomed silence.

On both sides of the world the two colleagues regularly asked for the daily report.

"What's new?"

"Nothing, sir."

Monsieur Ploux reacted with, "Ahl"

Mr. Plow: "Ha!"

Almost nostalgically.

Monsieur Ploux gazed thoughtfully at the neatly prepared graph, which he lovingly undated each day and whose line abruptly ended, as it were, in midair, like a bewildered

caterpillar at the very tip of a leaf.

Mr. Plow wistfully eyed the tabulator, which he had secretly bought and hidden in a corner of his desk drawer, but which he had never used.

Once, following a lecture on Nietzsche, Kafka, Poe, and some other blithe spirits, Station KPFA broadcast a brilliant interview with Mr. Plow on modern methods of suicide. On his side, Monsieur Ploux published in *Le Figaro* regular installments of his memories, in which he hypocritically deplored the unfortunate reputation of the Eiffel Tower, the devourer of so many unhappy lives. Both efforts were highly successful. Subsequently, the tower and the bridge recorded an unusual influx of visitors: sensation-seekers, journalists, photographers, writers.

The great period was over. Little by little the relations between men turned sour. The Parisian began to dispute his colleague's statistics on the ground that there had been no tabulator at the Golden Gate. The San Franciscan retorted that the unofficial Eiffel Tower tabulator smelled of rank commercialism. After hiring spies, each one accused the other of not properly applying the advice that had been exchanged. Words flew back and forth, such as: cheat, liar, bluffer, treachery, and others no friendlier.

When he was told that his conduct was that of a "sentaugulo," Mr. Plow sensed the meaning of the insult. He learned Esperanto.

The dispute was unequal, for June, influenced by her long col-

laboration on the side of the bridge, brought to bear the bitterness of feminine pugnacity. Sickened by such an alliance against him, Paris denounced U.S. imperialism. In answer, San Francisco mocked French ineptitude. The Eiffel Tower cursed Christopher Columbus. The Golden Gate alluded to UNO, ELNA, MLF, NATO, UEA, UNESCO, YMCA, and LKK, when —

— when Monsieur Ploux restored the debate, he wired: "501."

Unfortunately, the time for honest investigation into the facts was over, June Fairmont definitely closed the dispute with her final letter:

Sir:

I shall not try to learn by what dubious methods you have attained this result. I shall not even insist on an inquiry.

The crux of the matter for me is this. In a few weeks I shall become Mrs. Plow and I do not want you to madden my husband with this stupid competition. I shall prove to you that you will not be able to win.

The score is now tied, I admit. But you have not taken into consideration the fact that the Eiffel Tower is seventy-five years old and the Golden Gate Bridge only twenty-eight. When the Eiffel Tower score approaches 1500 points, your grandsons will have the right to speak to our on equal terms. Good-by.

Monsieur Ploux was leaning against the balustrade of the third level when he read this letter. No one knows whether his heart gave out before or during his long drop. But the Eiffel Tower provisionally recaptured the world's record.

A relative one, that is. **END**

INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE FICTION

# WITCHCRAFT FOR BEGINNERS

by F. C. GOZZINI



**D**o you remember the year the Acme Publishing Corporation published in installments *Witchcraft for Beginners*? I do, and very well too, because it was the year my brother disappeared.

Those Acme people really knew their business. All their subjects were interesting and exciting, and every number stopped at the most thrilling point, so you could hardly wait for the next week to come so you could find out what happened next.

For example, once they published something called *The Holy Bible*, and one of the numbers stopped just when a character named Joshua was trying to stop the sun. You can imagine that the following week everybody rushed to the nearest store to get the new issue and find out if Joshua had done it or not. Actually, he had.

Now, when this *Witchcraft for*

*Beginners* began to appear, I was among the first to buy copy Number 1, because I had read a lot about witches and magic and so on. In the books I had read everything was mysterious and not very clear, and I wanted to know how those people did all their tricks.

My brother had the same tastes, so we worked together. We took turns in being experimented upon. It was my brother, who was turned into a frog and back one week, and it was I, who became a beautiful mermaid, and so on.

Then one day, after many months — it was my turn to perform the tricks — an issue was published in which they taught you how to make people disappear. It was really nothing, once you caught the *knack*, and I learned almost immediately.

I muttered all that *mumbo-jumbo* that makes an enchantment look real

effective and . . . one . . . two . . . three . . . my brother was no longer there. That is, I could feel him (I think it is some sort of telepathy); but I couldn't see him.

I tell you, it was real fun feeling him and not seeing him, and we made all sorts of jokes about it. I said that he had better stay that way and the girls would like him more, and he said that he would come by night and give me nightmares and all.

We really enjoyed that week. He gave me all the right answers in school and frightened half the town

give me the instructions how to bring him back.

Tuesday came and I went to the store and saw a big poster hung on the door. It said:

"The Acme Publishing Corporation is sorry to announce that, due to the sudden death of their staff magician, no more issues of *Witchcraft for Beginners* are going to appear."

And that wasn't the only thing that wasn't going to appear any more!

I have never seen my brother since



making everybody feel him, and they thought he was speaking to them and looked around and he was not there. He made the girls blush in the street, and when they turned round all flustered and pretty, they couldn't see him and were even more flustered. They probably thought they had dirty minds.

All the same, by the time the week was nearly over he had emptied his bag of tricks and was beginning to get bored. So was I, and we waited anxiously for Tuesday to come, when the next issue would appear and

that day, but he is always here, nagging me and pestering me and giving me nightmares by night, and scaring all my girl friends away, and drinking heavily, making people think it's me that oozes alcohol from every pore. If only he wouldn't drink whisky! He knows I can't bear the stuff.

Anybody who knows how to make people reappear please rush the instructions to me at once. Please, anybody who knows. I'm frantic!

END



Translated by S. Ostrofsky

The ringing of the phone woke me. The hour hand on the lustrous alarm-clock dial had moved to the two mark. Wondering who could be calling me so late, I picked up the receiver.

"At last you're awake!" I heard Smirnov's agitated voice. "Please, wake up immediately!"

"What's happened?"

"A calamity. Homunculus has appeared. He's been seized with thirst for destruction, and I shudder to think of the mess he might make in such a state."

"Haven't I told you . . ." I began, but he had hung up.

There was no time to waste.

It was I who gave him the name when Smirnov first conceived the idea of creating a thinking automaton with a will of its own. He thought of applying the threshold molecular elements of his own intention to the fashioning of a human brain.

Even then the extravagance of this notion had caused me to protest vehemently. I couldn't see the need for it. I had always considered that cybernetics problems should be limited to the synthesis of automata that would make man's work easier. I never doubted the endless possibilities of imitating life, but attempts to create an electronic human model seemed to me simply repulsive. Frankly speaking, I feared the inevitable conflict between man and the mechanical creature made by him in his own image — an image devoid of all human traits and endowed with a free will determined not by emotions, but by dry abstract rules of mathematical logic. I felt sure that the more perfect such an automaton would be, the more inhumanly would it behave when choosing the means for the achievement of its goals.

All this I stated frankly to Smirnov at that time.



"You are as much of a bigot," he answered, "as those who declare that growing a human embryo in a test tube is contrary to the elementary norms of morality. A scientist cannot afford the luxury of being sentimental about such things."

"Growing a human embryo in a test tube," I retorted, "for the purpose of utilizing its tissue in graft surgery, is done for human reasons and is morally defensible. Imagine, on the other hand, that someone took it into his head to grow a live human being in a test tube, out of sheer curiosity. Such efforts to create a new Homunculus would be, in my opinion, just as contemptible as the notion of developing a cross between man and ape."

"Homunculus!" He burst out laughing. "That's what I've been looking for! I think I'll name my robot Homunculus."

Smirnov was awaiting me on the staircase.

"Take a look," he said, opening the door to his apartment.

What I saw struck me, above all, by its senselessness. On the floor, right in the entrance, lay the mutilated remains of a TV set. It was as though someone tore it into bits out of a perverted sense of delight.

I could smell the peculiar odor of gas and stepped into the bathroom. The small hot-water heater no longer existed. Pieces of coil, tortured out of shape, lay scattered in the corridor.

Turning off the faucets, I made my way to Smirnov's study. Here the instinct of destruction was less

in evidence, but the books on the shelves and the papers on the desk were in chaotic disarray.

"Tell me how it happened," I asked, seating myself on the couch.

"There is little enough I can tell you," he said, trying the while to make some order among his papers. "As you know, a year ago I took Homunculus home from the laboratory so that I could devote more attention to him. About two weeks ago he started feeling dejected. He acquired a sudden interest in everything connected with death and asked many questions about what causes it. A few days ago, he asked me to explain to him in detail the difference between himself and a human being. Later he wanted to know whether I might decide, at some future date, to take his life. It was then that I made a mistake. I was so tired of his moping that I threatened to dismantle him if he didn't alter his behavior and do his assignments more carefully.

"Will I then cease to exist, and will nothing remain of me but a heap of dead parts?" he asked, gazing at me intently.

"I answered in the affirmative.

"After this conversation he fell silent. For days on end he sat pondering something; and tonight, when I returned home, I found the front door open and the apartment looking as if a herd of wild elephants had passed through it. As for Homunculus, there was not a trace of him."

"Where could he have gone?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. The only time he was ever out of doors

was when I drove him here from the lab. Could it be that he remembered the way and went there? Just searching for him all over town, without some plan, makes no sense. I think it might be best to check if he isn't in the lab."

We came out on the landing. I noticed as we were walking down the stairs that some of the iron posts supporting the bannister were torn out. One of them was missing.

For a moment I felt sick. It was easy to conjecture what an infuriated robot, escaping from being dismantled, might be capable of, armed with an iron club.

We walked out into the street and turned the corner. A police car was parked in front of a large department store. Despite the late hour, a number of people had collected near a broken window.

A quick look at the chaos reigning inside the store sufficed to explain what had occurred there. It was a display of the same blind fury, the same mad thirst for destruction that struck me in Smirnov's apartment. Even the sidewalk was strewn with battered tape recorders and radio receivers.

Silently, Smirnov pointed at a large headless doll flung on a pile of debris, and I perceived what a horrible fate awaited anyone who might cross the path of Homunculus tonight.

Two policemen with a dog left the store. The dog faltered helplessly in the doorway.

"It won't take the scent," said one of the policemen.

HOMUNCULUS

Smirnov hailed a passing taxi and gave the driver the lab's address.

To our surprise, the watchman, on the job since early in the evening, was having a peaceful cup of tea and was aware of no robots. We searched the whole building but found nothing suspicious. The track of Homunculus was lost.

Tired, Smirnov lowered himself into a chair.

"The battery charge is good for two days," he said, wiping his damp forehead. "Who knows what mischief he might do in that time. Unfortunately, his is clever enough to find ways to recharge."

Drastic measures were urgently in order.

We hastened to the police station.

The lieutenant on duty treated our story with skepticism at first; but before long the prospect of chasing an iron monster, obsessed with a mania for vengeance on mankind, aroused his professional interest. In a few moments he was in telephone contact with every police precinct. There was nothing left for us to do but wait. The excellently coordinated machine for maintaining law and order was at work.

Reports began to come in almost immediately. All of them, however, dealt with the usual night happenings of a large city. None of the committed crimes bore the imprint of what the experts call "the hand of the criminal," so familiar to me by now.

It was obvious that the robot was somewhere in hiding, waiting for the vigilance of his pursuers to slacken.

At dawn, tired and even more worried than before, we said good-bye to the lieutenant and drove to Smirnov's place to discuss further plans of action over a cup of coffee.

Unfortunately, our hopes of coffee weren't to be fulfilled.

After mounting the stairs, we saw the door to the apartment smashed into splinters and lights burning in every room.

I glanced at Smirnov and was amazed at the strange pallor of his face.

"Homunculus came to settle his score with me," he muttered, resting against the wall. "Quick, phone the lieutenant, or we are both lost."

In a few minutes a car with three policemen drove up to the house.

"Is the criminal inside this apartment?" asked the brave sergeant, undoing his holster. "Does anyone know the room layout?"

"Your pistol won't do any good here," Smirnov told him. "The robot's body is made of chromium and molybdenum steel. Wait. I'll run down and get the car cover. The only way to render Homunculus harmless is to snare him with a net."

He was back soon, accompanied

by a hefty janitor dragging a large tarpaulin.

There were six of us now. Six men resolved on rendering harmless this electronic fiend. Still, each of us felt rather uneasy.

"He must be in the study," whispered Smirnov, peeping inside the door. "Follow me. I'll try to distract him for a moment, while you throw the tarpaulin over him. Only don't delay, for he's armed with an iron bar."

Noiselessly, with bated breath we advanced slowly through the hall. Smirnov was the first to enter the study, and all at once we heard the hoarse, raucous sounds of a man whose throat was caught in an iron grip.

What we saw when we entered made us stop dead in our tracks.

On the floor, in the midst of scattered radio parts and all kinds of metal scrap, with his master's manuscripts spread out before him and humming a quiet song, sat Homunculus making a tiny robot. As we entered, he was attaching to it the baby-doll's head that he obtained in the raided store.

END



From GERMANY



by Helmuth W. Mommers and Ernest Vleck

Translated by Harry Warner, Jr.

The room is cramped and damp. Its walls are not high, and they are bare. A narrow board is set into the wall, along the long side of the room, opposite the door. It extends only an arm's length into the room. When I want to sleep, I lie down on it.

This is not the first time that I'm confined here. I'm sent here, every time I refuse to eat. That happens frequently. I simply don't like the slop that they feed me.

But I don't mind the cellar. Actually, I can do here whatever I want to do, without getting a bawling out or a beating. If I close my eyelids to a narrow slit, I can see through the brick wall. I can see farther, too. Beyond there are many corridors. This is interesting — much better, anyway, than to be with the other boys.

I don't feel right around them. But that is not my fault. If they were nicer boys, I could really feel

happy when I played with them. But they disgust me and frighten me. So usually I don't touch the food and get ordered to the cubbyhole in the cellar. The superintendent calls it solitary confinement.

But that doesn't matter to me, because I have here everything I need. If I get hungry, I simply go through the wall down to the lake and eat a few of the green plants that swim in the water, the plants that make the others sick. However, I do this only at night. Once the other children saw me eating the greens and talked about it everywhere. Now everyone knows it. Even the superintendent. But this is only one of the reasons why nobody wants anything to do with me.

The superintendent doesn't want me, either, I know. Because he says that he longs for the day when someone will come and take me away. He keeps throwing nasty looks at me, and he bangs his cane on the

table until it rattles. If I jump, he grins. But obviously, nobody wants me, not even those out there who come to get the other children. If the superintendent shows me to someone, the visitor's face reflects his thoughts. And I know why. My red eyes disturb them, and my unusually pale skin. Then I cry . . .

I feel best here in the cellar. The plank I lie on is hard, but that doesn't bother me. If my back starts to ache, I hover over the board for a while. This not only helps, it is fun, too. But it also makes me hungry, and then I go through the wall and get some green stuff.

Now I lie once again on my back, without sleeping. I twist my head a little, so I can see the rat-hole in the right corner, near the door. Ha, the superintendent believes I get afraid when there is no light down here. But I can see despite the darkness, when I want to. When I don't want to, I close my eyes and sleep.

There is another rustling in the rathole. I will try not to be afraid of the rat, if it comes out, so that I needn't do anything to it. I don't want to do anything to anyone. I know how it is, when something hurts. Not in the body, because I don't mind that, but right here, where the heart is.

I don't know if it is daytime or nighttime up there, and I am not going to find out, because I am tired. So I close my eyes. But I can't sleep, because a sound creeps into the back of my head. I sense a man, approaching my cell. It is Butcher.

He is not a good man. He is bad.

The key is turning in the rusty lock. The wooden door opens with a creak. Bright lights hit my eyes, and I must adjust to it.

Butcher stands in the doorway laughing nastily. He smells of liquor.

"Out you go, albino," he says. His teeth are yellow. I don't move fast enough, and he comes in and grabs me by the arm, hard. He believes that this hurts me, but that isn't correct. Nevertheless, I cry, because I know that he likes this and will leave me alone sooner. But today he is in a particularly bad mood.

"You must be gettin' feeble," he sneers. He pulls me through the cellar corridor. "You haven't eaten any seaweed for a while, eh?" He laughs so loud that it echoes from the vaulting of the cellar. "Well, you can catch up now. Run, albino!"

He shoves me away, to the worn stairway. I run up the steps and reach the big door that leads into the outdoors. I push at the latch, but Butcher has jammed it. He comes up behind me and laughs in an out-of-breath way.

"Let's go, albino, open up!"

Desperately, I yank at the door-latch. Butcher is already reaching for me. I smell the liquor and I feel his breath hot on the back of my neck. As fast as I can, I soften the door and go through. Fortunately, nobody is outside the door who could see me. Butcher cannot harm me. He'll think a lot about this, but he'll be careful not to tell what went on, because he is drunk and nobody will believe him. He knows it, too.

I stand in the open air and look around.

It is daytime. The sun is shining. There is not a cloud in the sky. A couple of older boys are playing ball on the grass. No supervisor is with them, and the boys certainly noticed nothing. The playground equipment at the edge of the woods isn't being used. But to the left, behind the road, in the rickety cottage, a few boys and girls are standing around Professor Camprini, practicing a song. Professor Camprini is our teacher of physical education, music and vocational trades. He treats me better than any of the other grown-ups. He leaves me alone. Sometimes he takes my part.

"Hello, Oliver," he calls, noticing me. "Won't you join us?"

"I've got to see Superintendent Allman," I shout back.

"Don't bother, he isn't there. Aren't you coming?"

I hesitate, because I see Gerd with Professor Camprini. He tries to bother me, every chance he gets. So I say:

"No, I'd rather go swimming, sir."

I turn away and go down the road that leads to the lake. "Cellar albino!" the children call after me, laughing. That hurts me more than Butcher's mistreatment, and I ask myself why I can't enjoy this lovely day like the other children. Because I am different, maybe? But nobody knows that, except myself. It's just bothersome, that they once saw me eating the greens. I ran away once, too, but that was no use. They brought me back. I got a beating then.

Here beside the lake are only a few children who pay no attention to me. I undress quickly. I'm absolutely filthy from the cellar.

"**O**liver!" Lorie's voice comes across the water. Her head pops out of the lake. The water ripples in circles from her swimming strokes. I signal to her. And I sense, coming from her over the water to me, her happiness that I dared to get out of the cellar. Lorie is a good girl.

But I feel a terror. I turn. Gerd is coming. He intends something nasty — naturally.

Gerd is bigger and older than I am. Stronger muscles, too. But I could still lift him thirty feet through the air and then let him drop. But I don't dare go that far. Nobody must know anything about my powers. Not even Lorie.

"Well, cellar bug, do you want to play?" says Gerd, jokingly.

A crowd has formed around him, already.

"Please, Oliver, stay there, don't go into the water," Lorie calls to me.

Why should I stay here? I don't want to give in meekly always.

"I'm going swimming," I say boldly. With that, I'm in the water. It feels good here. I'm a good swimmer. Swimming is fun.

"Look out, Oliver!" Lorie calls suddenly. From the catch in her voice, I know she has swallowed water. I sense the fear that she feels for me. Lorie is a pal. She likes me.

But I've forgotten to pay atten-

tion to Gerd. I'll swim away fast — too late. I feel his hand on the nape of my neck.

"Albino," he says, spitting water, "I'm going to teach you to dive." He pulls me to the bank. I kick, but I don't dare to use my real strength. Too many are watching. We reach the shore, and Gerd stands a head taller than me. The other children start yelling in excitement. I hear their shouts, until the water closes over my head. I struggle but Gerd had a good hold on me and keeps me beneath the water. I can't breathe. My lungs ache. I can't stand it any longer. What should I do? Gerd won't let go! Despairingly, I claw at Gerd's leg. He jerks but doesn't let go. I feel myself fainting, then —

I'm breathing!

I'm breathing under the water, but my mouth is closed. I sense the cool, pleasant water streaming through my nose, into my body, filling my extra-lungs; then I open my gills and expel the water.

That was swell. A nice fresh feeling spreads through my body. But in the next moment, I'm afraid and I'm sorry for what I did. I've been too long under the water. That will attract attention.

The grasp on my neck loosens.

As if I'm struggling for air, I raise myself from the water. I gasp and spit and shake my head. Gerd is at my side. He looks worried until he sees that I'm all right, then he utters a nasty laugh. I could yell at this moment for anger. He must have seen the gills. They are just closing.

With an awful yell, Gerd dashes away.

The other children watch him go, puzzled. They noticed nothing. Nevertheless they pull away from me and run away, one after the other.

Even though I do not turn my head, I know that Lorie is approaching.

"Poor, poor Oliver," she says, laying her hand on my shoulder. I nod silently. I've kept my secret so long. And today I've had one mishap after the other.

Now I shall go back. It's best this way. When it grows dark and bedtime comes, the children will certainly come. To my bed. To tease and beat me. I can't bear that much longer. One of these times, I'll give them a lesson. But I must think out things first. Maybe I'll soften up the tree when they are climbing on it. One of these times . . .

Butcher is combing my hair.

First he washed me and dressed me up. I'm wearing the suit that a child always puts on, when somebody gets interested in one of us.

Yesterday Superintendent Allman sent for me.

"Oliver," he began, without putting away his newspaper. I stood before him in my tattered clothing. If I raised onto my tiptoes, I could have gotten a good look over his desk. "Maybe you'll be leaving us. Someone is interested in you."

I didn't answer. I couldn't understand it at all. It was as if one of my dreams were turning into reality.

"Let's hope things go right this

time," the superintendent continued, as he leafed through the newspaper. "Act properly. Do you understand? Be on your good behavior. Once you're out of here, you can behave any way you please. But people must get a good impression of you, to take you along with them. If they take you, they can complain later on all they want to. You won't be back."

How happy I was! This time I'll try not to do anything wrong. I want so badly to get away from here.

I can't imagine what it's like to live with a family and to be considered their son.

Someone has been thinking about adopting me!

So Butcher is combing my hair. And he tries his best to make this task as unpleasant for me as he can. But to his disgust, this time I don't complain. Soon I'm going to leave. And nowhere can it be worse than here.

Why hasn't Gerd revealed his discovery, though? He has always been proud when he could cause me trouble. Does he think that nobody would believe him this time? Possibly.

"Ouch." It slips out, when Butcher pulls my hair.

"Shut up," he says and gives another yank. He is drunk again. "Finished!"

I jump out of the chair fast, before he can lift me off by the ear. That makes him mad. "Come here!" he roars. Already he holds up my coat, so that I can slip into it. It is far too big for me. But that makes

no difference. He gives another tug at my tie, then steps back and looks at me calculatingly.

"You're still too pale," he says. Like a flash, he has boxed my ears a couple of times. "That'll give you some color." He bares his yellow teeth.

There is a knock at the door.

"What is it?" Butcher yells.

The door opens a trifle.

"Both men are here already," a child's voice says. The door closes quickly. Butcher takes his coat from the hook and puts it on.

"Now we'll be getting rid of you."

Suddenly, I can see it in his eyes. Next his evil thoughts rush over me. He comes toward me, slowly. His eyes are half-closed as he murmurs: "Be quiet, albino. Now I'm parting from you."

I know that he can't do much to me, at this moment, but just the same, with every step that he makes in my direction, I move backward a little. Until I feel the wall at my back.

"You're a monster, albino," he whispers. "Do you still know how you got through that closed door? Only a monster could do it, so you're one. If I'd told the superintendent, he would have laughed at me. But we two, you and I, we know better." With these words, he is beside me. He presses me against the wall with the weight of his body. My breath comes in gasps. "Don't we? We two know that you can go through walls. All right, try to escape — like last time."

He laughs. I can feel his belly shaking.



"But now you'll give it up. Right? You want to get away, so you won't do anything fancy. What would you think, if right now I —"

"Mr. Butcher." A child's voice again comes through the closed door. "You must hurry, Superintendent Allman says."

He sighs. "Oh, well. Let's go, albino. I believe you'll be going away."

He goes to the door and waits for me to open it for him. I go out into the corridor that leads to the kitchen, dining room, and offices. Butcher is on my heels. The wooden floor creaks under our feet.

Butcher takes my hand, and I must hurry to keep up with him, or he will crush my hand. I must almost run. But I'll put up with anything Butcher can do to me now, if I can only get away.

Will it happen this time? It would be so wonderful to be far from the walls of the orphans' home. What is life like out there? I've been outside only once, and they hauled me back again at once.

If the people take me along with them, I shall never come back here again. I would rather die. What are they like? I can't hold in my curiosity, and I try to read the thoughts of the two men who are interested in me. But I can detect nothing. The superintendent's room is too far away.

Our steps resound plainly through the corridor. Especially Butcher's steps. He is wearing his boots. Butcher might be called a Jack-of-all-trades. He works in the garden, often he helps out in the kitchen,

he goes shopping in the station wagon to the city and does all sorts of other things. But there's nothing in his duties that says he should torture me.

But he won't do that much longer. Somehow, I have the feeling that the two men who have come to the orphanage really are interested in me. I get such a feeling often, and I'm never fooled. I had the same feeling that Lorie likes me.

We have reached the point where the corridor makes a turn.

I sense Lorie's presence. When we reach the corner, she is standing there before me. And in the same moment, I also feel something that comes from the two men. Butcher still holds me by the hand.

"Oliver," Lorie says. "There are tears on her face. 'Are you leaving us?'"

"I'll come to say good-by," I declare and try to wait so I can say something else. Butcher pulls at my hand.

Then I feel again sensations from the two men. From Superintendent Allman, too. He is delighted, that he soon will be rid of me. The two men, however . . .

Lorie sees the torment on my face. She is fooled by it.

"Oliver!"

"Come on," Butcher urges. "Are you going to be stubborn?"

The door to the superintendent's office is ten feet in front of us. The door looks haughty and unfeeling to me at this moment. Hostile. I start trembling. Butcher pulls me along. I try to squirm out of his grasp, but all my struggles do no good. He

simply holds me tighter. I could defend myself against Butcher, but I completely forget about my abilities. I have nothing but horrible fear. That makes me unable to think clearly.

"Albino, you're the very devil," Butcher growls. He kicks at my leg but misses. I bite his hand, unsuccessfully.

"Damn it, won't you come any further?"

I see a picture of the two men before me. They are nattily dressed. Their hair is slicked down, carefully parted and well brushed. Both stand silently by the desk of the superintendent, who is addressing them. The two men aren't listening to him. They are staring entranced at the door through which I must enter. Each of them has one hand hanging down his side at a slight angle, the other hand raised chest-high, as if they intended to reach in a moment under the armpit. They are as much like one another as twins. Not only in their attitude, but in their faces. Their eyes are alert. They watch unceasingly the door.

Their emotions are black.

They are murderers.

Out to kill me.

I brace myself against Butcher's attempt to bring me to the door. With a curse, he tries to box my ears, but I wriggle so hard that he misses.

Suddenly we've reached the door. Butcher's hand goes to the knob and turns it.

Only for a moment, I look inside the room. I see the arms of the

murderer twins move like lightning. Then each has a dark object in his hand.

"What's this?" Superintendent Allman asks. A yell bursts from my throat, simultaneously.

I shove Butcher against the open door. The guns go off, barking. Already I'm ten feet away from the door. The bullets whine through the half-open door, dig into the wall. Splinters and dust rain down. Butcher shouts, bends forward and holds his stomach.

Fast as my feet will carry me, I run down the passage. I'm gasping from the effort. But I must get to the big wall that surrounds the building before I'll be safe. I want to get away from here, as fast as I can.

I come to the end of the corridor and lean against the wall, fighting for breath. Behind me, I hear commotion and cursing; I look around. The murderer twins are coming from the superintendent's office. They crouch a little when they see me. Their guns point toward me.

There is a crash.

But I'm already in the wall. I sense how it yields, then bright sunshine flows over me. I slip from the wall into the open.

I know that the wall is very high at this point. It must be 15 feet tall. Slowly I sink to the ground. But I find that my abilities are vanishing. I've never used them as often as today. I don't quite make the last few feet. I fall rather clumsily and twist my ankle. It hurts when I walk. But I'll fix it soon.

A window smashes up there in the

building. Glass tinkles down. I race through the grass.

"There he goes, Rip!"

Profanity.

"Shoot him!"

As I hobble on, the first voice calls again.

"Mandy, Grannert, he's given us the slip!"

To my left, at the surrounding fence, is a motion. A head looks over it. A metallic gleam flashes from a longbarreled weapon.

There is a tree.

But before I reach the tree, a burst of flame spurts from the machine-gun. Earth tumbles up around me. Something yanks my legs from under me. I fall. I'm hit in the thigh and I'm bleeding. With my last strength, I crawl behind the tree.

Cautiously I look around it.

At once the weapon bellows again from the fence. I pull my head back, fast. Instantly the bark splinters, and pieces of it fly through the air. Some shots flash whining past and lose themselves in the woods.

But that brief moment was enough for me to see what I wanted to see. The yard of the orphan asylum is crowded with armed men. A real campaign is in progress. And all of them are concerned with my life. Kill me, that's their command. They cautiously approach my tree. Some of them fan out to one side, others give them a covering fire. They want to surround me. Most of them are wearing uniforms.

Not far away, behind and below me, is the lake. If I can reach it, nothing more can happen to me. I

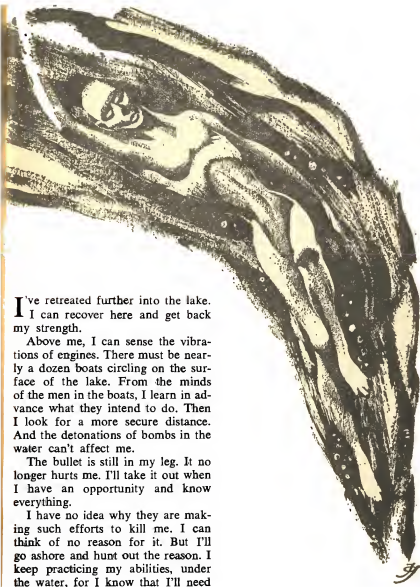


decide to make a desperate effort with the hope that I have enough strength for it. I put all my effort to the tree. I'm almost bawling with effort and fear. My leg hurts frightfully.

But the tree is giving way. A breaking and a snapping, among shouts of surprise.

I profit by the general confusion, jumping up and running into the woods. Down to the lake. Scattered shots ring out behind me, but I needn't worry about them any more. They're firing wildly.

My leg burns like fire, but I grit my teeth. I am on a slight downward slope that helps me to run. Then I reach the lake. I let myself drop into the water and feel the cold wetness embracing me with delight.



I've retreated further into the lake. I can recover here and get back my strength.

Above me, I can sense the vibrations of engines. There must be nearly a dozen boats circling on the surface of the lake. From the minds of the men in the boats, I learn in advance what they intend to do. Then I look for a more secure distance. And the detonations of bombs in the water can't affect me.

The bullet is still in my leg. It no longer hurts me. I'll take it out when I have an opportunity and know everything.

I have no idea why they are making such efforts to kill me. I can think of no reason for it. But I'll go ashore and hunt out the reason. I keep practicing my abilities, under the water, for I know that I'll need

them very often when I am back on dry land.

From time to time, I swim to the surface for a breath of fresh air. But I always choose the nighttime to do this. Even this is somewhat dangerous, because the soldiers must have something that allows them to see in the dark, as I can. Once they fired an artillery piece at me, just as I was about to go back under. Their aim was poor.

I simply must discover why they want to kill me. Is it simply because I am different from the others?

I don't believe it.

Now I'm ready. I can go ashore. Days have gone by. But they are still there.

Cautiously, I stay under the water as I swim to the bank. The membranes between my fingers and toes are quite useful in swimming. For a long while, I couldn't figure out the reason for their sudden appearance.

Thirty feet from the bank, I stop and hunt out the soldiers. By now I can detect thoughts over a greater distance. I discover ten soldiers, posted in a line along the shore. My sense of detection will reach no further.

They are heavily armed.

It is easy for me to slip by them. I locate a spot in the woods that isn't under observation. Then I swim to a bush that is growing close to the water. I pull myself ashore. I lie there, pressing myself flat against the ground. Steps are approaching. I imagine the throat of the soldier squeezed tight, and he collapses to the ground, noiselessly. I hope it wasn't too tight. I don't want to

kill anyone, I want only to learn why they hunt me down so mercilessly.

Once again, I sample the thoughts that come from the surrounding area. Nobody is near me. I stand up and go on; this way, I have my strength. Beyond, through the trees, I see the orphan asylum. It is brightly illuminated by a lot of searchlights. And I sense another bunch of armed soldiers. But that doesn't interfere with my plans.

Somewhere in the asylum, there must be the people who are in command. And they must know why they are in command.

I concentrate my gaze on a spot on the ground, under which must lie the passageway that I discovered when I was locked in the cellar. My gaze goes through the ground, encounters a brick roof, goes through that — and the forgotten vault lies there before my eyes.

I soften the ground and sink into it. Then I am in the stifling cellar.

I listen. But my apprehension is unfounded. Nobody is down here. Either this part of the cellar is unknown or simply unguarded because no reason for protection could be found.

More calmly, I move through the silent passageway. Now I should be precisely beneath the orphan asylum. I look through the ceiling. Above me is a feebly lighted hall. It is abandoned. Without further ceremony, I rise upward, glide through the ceiling and stand in the building. The corridor is familiar. It leads to the storerooms.

I must go there. I hide in a small, narrow room, among the garden

tools. From here I can observe the whole building.

The first thing I notice is that children are no longer here. The soldiers are occupying the dormitories. Butcher's room and the living quarters of the superintendent are empty just now. But I can tell from the objects that are scattered around in these rooms that soldiers are quartering in them, too. Officers, most likely.

When I concentrate on the superintendent's office, I can see my course clearly foretold. There are five men in it, all wearing uniforms of shining gold. All over the upper story are armed sentries.

I soften the walls and slip through them. And I find for the first time that I can do many things at once. While I'm slipping through the walls, I keep my eyes on the office. I see the men engaged in a lively discussion, but cannot understand their remarks. Then I've come to the wall that encloses the office. I'll stop here.

Now I can not only see everything going on in there, but I can also understand plainly the conversation. I test to determine if I can really keep the wall soft while I'm looking and listening. It works splendidly.

I must discover why they want to kill me. It is possible that they fear me. And I want to know what it is about me that bothers them so much. I am lucky. I needn't wait long, until they start talking about this.

An elderly man in civilian clothing walks into the office. His hair is gray. The uniformed men salute.

"How do things look? Any luck yet?" he asks.

"None, General." That was the uniformed man wearing the most medals. "Not a clue, so far."

The gray man in civvies folds his hands behind his back. He moves slowly back and forth. Then he asks: "Just where is the young fellow — what do they call him, Gras — Graznig?"

"Gerd Grazlik, General," the same uniformed man replies. "We brought him away with the others."

"You should have sent them away separately."

"I was ordered to —"

"But Camprini is still there. Who knows what he'll think of? He was the one who wanted to wipe out the trail. When this Grazlik discovered that this monster has gills and told the teacher, Camprini tried to shut him up. We should be glad the boy ran to the police. We got tipped off about it."

The men in uniform move about uneasily. One says suddenly:

"Please, gentlemen. We're not fighting just the monster, but we're fighting time, too. Who knows what it might do, when it puts all its abilities together?"

The older man in civilian clothes is unmoved.

"So, if I may review the situation: Ten years ago, while I was on maneuvers with the Thirteenth Regiment — it happened. A thing that looked like a spaceship landed nearby. We didn't think of doing anything about it, at first. We simply reported it. Then somewhere, someone lost his head. Suddenly two

monsters came out of the spaceship and fought in the middle of a bunch of my soldiers. The monsters utilized unbelievable weapons. So we shot them down at once. We had to move quickly, or they would have eliminated us. That was clear from their capabilities. One of the monsters was female. She had a child at her side. The child was her only concern, of course. She managed to get the child away. This was kept secret, but we hunted the young monster. Ten years, without success."

The man with the most gold braid has been listening, silently. He sits down and says: "Now we know why we had no success. Camprini found the monster. We still can't determine what decided him to keep secret his unnatural discovery. He said something about pity. However, we have him in custody and we're questioning him thoroughly."

The retired general retorts: "Do you really believe, gentlemen, that you can destroy this monster? Now that it's been alerted? I think that the whole campaign is poorly organized."

"We've surrounded the lake and the shore around the orphan asylum."

The old man shakes his head. "That won't do much good. An atomic bomb is what we should use."

"You forget that this is a small nation, sir. By the time we could get permission for bombing, years might pass. The world peace authorities and the major powers don't take this matter seriously enough."

Silence. Then the gold-braided man says:

"They say they came from Venus."

"Yes." The gray-haired man nods. "They let us know that, before they blew up the spaceship."

I see before me the star that he is thinking about. I shall definitely be able to recognize it in the sky later.

I've heard enough. I sink into the wall, down until I have returned to the ruined cellar vault. Weary from my efforts, I relax there. I reflect.

And everything becomes clear to me. I know why they hate me, why they want to kill me. They are afraid of me. They are afraid of my powers. But it's so stupid! They don't know if I have any bad intentions, they simply are sure that I do. Only because I come from another world and because I am powerful. But I won't harm them. Not even now that I know what they did to my parents. I won't try to act like men, either. It's a shame that I haven't said a real good-bye to Lorie. But perhaps I shall still do that. And I'll think about Professor Camprini, and if I can somehow be useful to him, I'll help him. I hope he won't suffer from this.

Now I'm leaving the walls of the orphan asylum behind me. Now, because I know that I don't belong to the men, I shall go out into the world.

Cautiously but fearlessly, I walk into the open. The night sky is cloudless, and I see the star that the general mentioned. It shines brightly, like a friend.

I cannot yet go there, that is clear to me. **END**



by PHILIP E. HIGH

There was no fighting in the strictest sense of the word, but there was resistance, which is another interpretation. The suspect, therefore, took exception to open arrest — this was a police action, providing, of course, you were a policeman. If you were not you could call it unprovoked aggression.

Maxton called it exactly that. "Major, I don't care what you call yourself. You can be a police or peace officer; you can represent Interlaw, U.N.O., Nationpol or any other highfaluting name which suits, but in my book you're still an enemy officer. In my book you still entered the city as a civilian and turned in to military when it suited you."

Wendell sucked at a limp-looking cigarette and glowered at him. His own conscience was none too clear, but he fought back. "You made far

too many threats. It is the duty of Interlaw to prevent war before it occurs."

Maxton laughed jerkily and with contempt. "We boasted, yes, but our threat was economic, not military. We were racing ahead of you in technology so you had to move in and take over fast."

"I am not here to apportion responsibility." Wendell looked cold. "I am here to interrogate."

"And anything I say may be taken down and used against me — correct?"

Wendell sighed. "You will be confined to your quarters until further notice."

When an armed escort had taken the other away, the interrogator sighed again. Life was pretense, wasn't it? Of course he was an enemy soldier no matter what he call-



ed himself and yes, it was armed aggression no matter what the banner of righteousness.

He was suddenly depressed. No matter what happened or what the practical idealist managed to bring about, the human race was still fissionable material which all too easily became critical.

Heaven above knew they'd tried. The League of Nations, U.N.O., Nationpol and lastly Interlaw. All had added their quotas of treatment, many of them brutal, but what had been achieved? They had even gone so far as nation-mixing — nation-mixing, the shifting of entire populations to cure nationalisms. It sounded good at first, but the shifted races were soon indentifying themselves with their adopted countries.

Nationpol tried splitting countries into Sectors and finally into sub-sectors containing cities.

Wendell scowled and ground out his cigarette. Now, instead of nationalism, you had cityism which, since the major cities now housed anything between ten and a hundred million people, raised a major problem. There was, however, an even graver problem — Interlaw. Theoretically Interlaw was drawn from, and supported by, all sectors and all cities. Unfortunately, however, Interlaw, as a body, had developed paranoia. She had developed into a first-class parasite demanding the best in supplies and technical "cream" the cities could provide. Interlaw considered herself superior to any city; she was a kind of motherly gangster who said: "I'll protect you or else." Somewhere

the ideal was quietly disposed of, leaving the instrument to ruthless men.

Wendell lit another cigarette and scowled. Yes, Maxton had been right. This community's threat had been economic, not military, although, no doubt, General Greevon, the sector mayor, had long-term policies. God, the city had been racing ahead, hadn't it? There had been major break-throughs in almost every scientific field and some of the devices tended to render Interlaw completely impotent inside ten years — how?

The caller went, interrupting his thoughts and he touched a switch. "Yes?"

"Sir." Breaker looked hot and alarmed. "We've found something. These people have an undercity, complete with laboratories, factories and an entire transport system."

"Transport system — how big is it?"

"As near as we can tell, about twelve miles long and six wide."

"I'll be right with you." Wendell was calling for a command car before he had broken contact.

"That's an entrance, sir." Breaker jerked his thumb at a supra-steel door which was disguised as a blank wall. "A patrol found it while searching for snipers. It was open then, but it closed before they could get to it."

Wendell frowned. A side track in an underground transport system was a good hiding place, and their counter-intelligence must be first class. Interlaw, despite its ramifica-

tions, had had no inkling of this, only a rumor of some super-electronic brain which might or might not, account for the scientific ascendancy.

Technicians arrived with cutting instruments and a portable solar-burner on a tripod. It took nearly forty minutes to cut a hole in the door large enough to take a compact-charge. The resulting energy discharge left a hole large enough to admit three men, but it left the metal almost molten, and the technicians had to cool it.

They passed through it warily and found themselves in what might have been a major highway. A flock of spy-eyes preceded them and someone had begun operating a vocal beam. *"Officers of Interlaw are now entering this section of your city in the lawful execution of their duty—"*

In the distance there was a flicker of light, and one of the technicians fell stiffly forward and lay still.

Wendell flicked a switch on his belt which called the combat squads and ran for cover, but there was no further firing until the combat squads arrived.

*"Citizens are reminded that resisting arrest or obstructing the police in lawful execution of their duty is punishable under section two."*

Beside him, Grayling said: "What hypocrisy."

The two men understood each other, and Wendell nodded, ducking as advancing combat men leapt over his prone body and ran forward. "Worse, there seems to be a lot of obstruction."

After a time they were able to go forward, but there had been considerable resistance. Wendell stopped near one of the bodies and bent down, frowning. The dead man had once belonged to the city and wore a uniform which was forbidden under Interlaw. But it was not this which attracted Wendell's attention.

"How long have we been using cardiac guns as standard weapons?"

"Cardiac guns?" Grayling shook his head. "That's a new one on me."

"Take a look at this man's face, it's indicative. You'll find no marks on the body."

Grayling looked and paled. "What sort of weapon is this?"

"It was once very useful to remove a person discreetly due to a heart attack. Unfortunately, there was a plague of heart attacks, and people became suspicious. This weapon coagulates the blood — some people call this weapon a thrombosis gun."

"And now we're using it as a standard weapon?"

"True, after publicly outlawing it some two years ago."

Grayling nodded. "We don't change much, do we? I seem to remember in history that they outlawed the dum-dum bullet, having, of course, successfully won a war with it first." He shook his head slowly. "Sometimes, you know, I wonder — I wonder if it isn't about time another kind of intelligence took over."

"Yes," Wendell was curt. Too often, he wondered why he kept going, why he *bothered*, when he himself was nothing but a tool of a cor-

rupt organization which called itself the law.

An hour later resistance was over but it had been bitter. Worse, however, was the information that the operation had only just begun. Several hundred feet below this level was another where, apparently, the real work, whatever it was, was being carried out. A number of "arrests" however, gave Wendell enough information to call his team together and begin interrogation.

He set up his equipment in the first vacant office he found and ran off some printed lists.

"I want these men, they're boffins. Apparently below us is some sort of super project involving a cybernetic brain. These men have valuable information, and I want them brought in as soon as they are found. Oh, yes, I want Brogas at the top of the list badly. Not only is he their top scientist but evidence leads me to suppose he worked under coercion."

An officer entered and saluted. "Technical report, sir. All installations captured intact."

"Intact!" Wendell was incredulous. "There was no attempt at sabotage?"

"None, sir, but, if I may offer an opinion, I'm not happy about it."

"Go on, please."

"Well, sir, prisoners are cocky, really cocky, not reactively arrogant as one might expect. None of them are cowed and, although they don't say it in words, their general attitude suggests that our occupation is initial only. These underground workers, in complete contrast to the surface

population, behave as if they hold the winning cards."

Wendell frowned. "Well, for their personal information, those convicted of resisting arrest are due for personality erasure. Tell them that. Tell them that General Greevon, their inspired leader, is a prisoner in our hands and is to be indicted on a war-incitement charge. The information properly put over may deflate quite a few egos."

"I hope so, sir, but I doubt it." The officer saluted and withdrew.

Wendell scowled after him unhappily. His own men were not usually wrong, and if Mellor said the prisoners were cocky they were — but why?

The door slid open again for another officer. Behind him was a civilian in gray coveralls escorted by two armed privates.

The officer saluted. "Number seven on your list, sir — Savirin Malkirk."

Wendell said: "You may sit down." Then to the officer, "Where did you find him?"

"In a sort of cell, sir — er — rather like a monk's cell save that it was equipped with special recording instruments and a large number of tapes. The door, for some unknown reason, was supra-steel and about four inches thick. We had to get special torches to cut a hole in it."

"And when you'd opened it, did the prisoner try and defend himself?"

"No, sir. He seemed stunned to see us. He had no idea the place had been under attack or had fallen to our troops."

"Do you have any comments?"

"Well, sir, when we ordered him out he laughed and said: 'Certainly, you're too damn late now, anyway.' The prisoner refused to explain what he meant but from an examination of his cell we conclude he'd been shut in there about four weeks engaged on some special task."

"Thank you — have you a place of custody ready for this man when I've finished with him?"

"Oh, yes, sir, several rooms have been made ready for civilians."

"Fine." Wendell turned to the prisoner. "Have you anything to say?"

Malkirk made snorting noises through his nose. "Under the articles of Interlaw, you are entitled to my name, age, place of work and home address, if any."

"You understand that this city is now in our hands?"

"Does that remark imply that you are now prepared to waive the said articles on the pretext of military expedience?" Malkirk succeeded in looking both accusing and haughty.

"All right." Wendell sighed and turned to the officer. "Take this creep away and lock him up — mind he doesn't fall off his high-horse on the way."

The next prisoner was depressing-ly frank, however. "I'll tell you all I can but I'm afraid it won't do you any good. I fed data into a special unit. That data went to the 'brain,' our special cybernetic unit." He smiled, showing large, widely spaced teeth. "We call it Dopey, you

know, but I'm afraid Dopey is beyond your reach. Relatively it's only a few hundred feet, but we have that unit triggered. If your experts start pushing probes around, sooner or later they'll hit something. Then — bang!" The prisoner smiled again and spread his hands. "Nothing left of you, Humpty Dumpty. You know the rhyme, no doubt, all the King's horses, *et cetera* —"

Wendell cut short the flow of words with a gesture to the officer. "Remove this comedian," he said, sourly.

An hour passed before the search teams flushed out Brogas, the project director, from another cell at the end of a remote corridor.

"Sit down, please." Wendell was irritably aware that Breaker was breathing heavily behind him. Unfortunately he had the right to be here.

Brogas sat. He was a big man with an aggressive, deeply clefted chin and graying wiry black hair standing straight up from his scalp. "Interrogation, yes, co-operation, yes." He looked directly at Wendell with intensely blue eyes. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything you can tell us." Wendell knew he should feel elated but somehow he had already lost faith. There was something about this business which assured him that it had already gone sour.

"Where do I begin — cigarette?"

"We know you have the biggest cybernetic brain in the world." Grayling extended his case. "What, at the moment, is its primary project."

"Thanks." Brogas puffed gratefully. "Let's get ~~one~~ thing straight from the start. The brain is not the only thing we have. The brain is hooked electronically to auto-factories, precision instruments, chemicals and equipment. You see, Dopey not only finds the solution but he builds it as well."

"You mean this brain was asked for a missile, fed data, framework specifications and so on and came up with an A.E.T.S?" Wendell had an inexplicable sensation of cold in the pit of his stomach.

"That's the size of it. Everything Dopey has conceived he has also built himself."

"Our Intelligence is of the opinion that your — er — brain, is now engaged on a masterpiece."

Brogas blew a passable smoke ring. "In view of the local security impositions your Intelligence branch must be outstanding. Yes, Dopey is creating his masterpiece, even though I am not quite sure what it is."

"Not sure." Breaker sounded disbelieving.

Brogas sighed. "Look, each expert was confined to a sealed cell, as you've found out. Each was entrusted to feed certain data to the brain but each was unaware of the other's information. Apparently there was a master plan; each of us had a part of it, but only the General had the lot. Now, of course, Dopey has it and is working it out in his own peculiar fashion."

Again Wendell felt the peculiar unease in his stomach. "This brain

can decide just how he's going to do the job?"

"Oh, yes, we only state what we want and impose a limitation framework respecting size, weight, stress resistance and so on. How he carries out those instructions and with what materials and motive power is entirely his business."

"You speak," said Grayling slowly, "as if this damn brain was *alive*."

Brogas stubbed out the cigarette and looked up. "Well?"

Grayling paled slightly but did not answer.

"You've no idea what this project is at all?" Wendell was beginning to feel resigned.

"I can make two guesses — an ultimate weapon or an ultimate weapon-bearer, if you can make sense of that."

"I think I can." This time Grayling had lost all his color. "It could be a warrior robot."

Brogas made depreciating sounds with his tongue. "Now there's a happy thought — Dopey is due to give birth, as it were, in ten hours. As your men have no doubt discovered by now, Corridor Twenty-five ends in a blank wall. That 'wall' is a supra-steel door five feet thick which Dopey will open when he's ready."

"We'll have to blast it open." Breaker was sweating.

"I've told you, it's triggered and I don't mean to a grenade."

Breaker glowered at him. "It seems to me you can afford to be co-operative, and I'd also like to know just how much of himself a

man can sell without losing his soul. It seems to me that this coercion one hears so much about is a convenient self-conduct ticket on one side and an open cheque on the other. It strikes me, having done rather well under General Greevon, you can turn that ticket over for the benefit of an Interlaw court. In my opinion, a scientist of your caliber should submit to torture rather than sell out his own race."

Strangely Brogas did not lose his temper. "How old are you — ten? Haven't you ever seen life outside a solidio drama? Torture! What age are you living in, boy? They don't tell you, they don't threaten you, they don't even address you personally. They just sit you in front of a screen which looks straight into the front room of your own apartment. You can see your wife in the big blue chair, the blank-faced guards at the door and your kids with frightened, tear-strained faces. A guard prods your little girl towards the screen. 'There's your father, tell him, dear, tell him.'"

Brogas clenched his fists briefly. "Then your little girl starts whimpering. 'Daddy, don't let them take mummy away, don't yet hurt us.'" The scientist rose. "I'll tell you something, my naive friend, at times like that one woman and three small children are the entire human race. One day, when you grow up, perhaps you'll understand."

"You insolent swine." Breaker flushed angrily.

"Breaker." Wendell's voice was so soft it was almost inaudible, but the other heard it.

"What — oh — yes, yes, sir?"

"Mr. Breaker." Wendell did not even bother to look at him. "We have with us a scientist not only willing to answer our questions but prepared to co-operate. His accusation of naivete on your part I will not only endorse but loudly applaud; your world is obviously confined to the mock heroics of a contrived drama and you are, in consequence, boorishly arrogant and wholly irresponsible." Wendell paused and looked at Grayling. "Kindly refer those remarks to official record and arrange for immediate transport out — Mr. Breaker is relieved of duty."

When Breaker had gone Wendell sighed with a relief. A little more of this sort of thing and Brogas would dry up like a spring in dry weather. God, where did Personnel dig up people like Breaker?

He turned back to the scientist. "Is there any way in which we can determine this brain's end product?"

"Only by questioning all the scientists feeding it data and even then we cannot be sure. We may have a clearer picture, but much of the data is in mathematical formula which might take a long time to break down."

"If you had some data could you get an outline?"

"I might."

"Give some encouragement, for God's sake! Four of your scientists were killed in the attack and one, Malkirk, is a loyalist."

"Leave Malkirk to me, he's only loyal if not threatened."

Wendell looked shocked. "I can't do that! I can't use force on a civilian prisoner."

Brogas beamed. "You can't but I can. Further, under the articles of Interlaw, you cannot interfere with purely civil affairs until the appointment of a joint control commission unless those said affairs endanger occupation forces or equipment — these don't."

"But I'll be *here*," Wendell was aware that his tone carried more emphasis than sincerity.

Brogas dismissed it with a gesture. "Bad vision, old boy, you never saw it. No need to worry, I'm not putting him on a rack, just applying a little more pressure than your authority permits."

Much to the good of Wendell's conscience, Brogas handled the affair with a ruthless sang-froid, giving the loyalist no time to argue.

"As you are aware, my dear Malkirk, I have always been opposed to the regime and I am now working openly for the Interlaw. I share the opinion of the experts that Dopey is due to give birth to something diabolical. In my opinion that something may endanger the entire race and, therefore, we should know something about it in advance. We cannot learn more, however, without access to certain information—" Brogas rose and encircled Malkirk's neck with both hands. "Shall we have a little talk about certain classified data?"

Much to Wendell's relief Malkirk whimpered once, blustered and then began to talk.

At the end of three hours they had collected his information and a great deal more from the other surviving scientists. It took Brogas and Grayling almost two more to break down some of the simpler mathematics and itemize the results, then they stood back and looked at their findings.

"No," Grayling's voice was subdued. "It must be a weapon. I hold degrees in robotomy; and nothing on Earth, not even Dopey as you call him, could build a robot to specifications like that."

"You could be right," Brogas sounded resigned. "I just find it hard to visualize a weapon which is twenty-five per cent amphibious."

They laid the paper almost reverently in front of Wendell.

"Sixty per cent of the necessary data is lacking," apologized Brogas. "That's the best we could do with what we could get. I'm afraid we're not much nearer than before."

Wendell picked up the paper and was shocked at its brevity, all that toil and sweat to get so little.

The data was itemized under two simple positive and negative headings: —

#### IT MUST

- (1) Be 75% self-repairing.
- (2) Adaptable (?)
- (3) 25% Amphibious
- (4) Possess a decision/assimilative/retentive reasoning mechanism.
- (5) Contain within itself the means or factors necessary for the construction of similar units without human intervention.
- (6) Function in a normal atmo-

sphere within the following temperature ranges . . .

### IT MUST NOT

- (1) Be confined to one type of fuel or energy source.
- (2) Require comprehensive spares.
- (3) Require new factory lay-out or extensive re-tooling of existing plants.
- (4) Contain rare or highly expensive elements.

Temperature figures not included in the information — *Brogas*.

Wendell looked up, frowning. "Your guess is as good as mine — and you say that General Greevon knows what this is?"

"No," said Brogas, quickly. "As I tried to explain, the general knows what he wants, *not* what Dopey will give him. For instance, he might have stated baldly that he wanted a digging instrument. Thinking only in conventional terms consider what he might get — an excavator, a nuclear-borer, a drill, explosives or a spade."

Wendell said, "Thank you," tiredly and resisted a temptation to scratch a prickling scalp. "Was General Greevon an intelligent man — intelligent enough to consider possible repercussions?"

"No." Brogas sounded without hope. "He was politically astute but otherwise a strutting hysteric which, to be frank, frightens me."

Wendell nodded. "It frightens me, too."

"Surely," began Grayling, "we can —"

He was interrupted by a clicking sound in the corner and printed tape ejected itself from a slot in the wall. Light flickered round the slot to attract attention, then there was a final click and the section of the tape fell to the floor.

Grayling picked it up and laid it on Wendell's desk.

"Well, I'm —" Wendell stopped, feeling cold inside. On the tape the small but clearly visible print had a character and malevolence all its own:

*Since alarms have indicated the illegal occupation of the area by hostile troops this message is addressed to the officers and men of the occupation forces.*

### WARNING

*In two hours the first two units of warrior machines will be released from the production mechanisms. The warrior unit has been fully briefed both in its role and the techniques of assault. It is fully educated to its environment and will be found capable of question and response. It will commandeer the types of fuel necessary for continued efficiency.*

**ANY ATTEMPT TO MOLEST,  
DESTROY OR PREVENT THE  
WARRIOR REACHING THE  
SURFACE WILL TRIGGER  
THE DEMOLITION CHARGE.  
PRODUCTION WILL BE REG-  
ULAR. ANY ATTEMPT TO  
DISORGANIZE THE BUILD-UP  
OF WARRIOR UNITS TO THE**



**LEVEL OF TEN LAND DIVISIONS WILL ALSO TRIGGER THE CHARGE.**

**IMPORTANT NOTE.**

*Demolition S/hyper 10.*

Wendell held out the note without speaking. He was past caring about a greasy face and unsteady hands. S/hyper 10 was a formula not for an explosive but a disruption. The brief but calamitous bridging of Sol and time/space would cause a distortion of matter which would not only destroy the entire system but endanger the galaxy as well. God, the blasted machine had them by the short hairs — what had he thought about a *big tin god*?

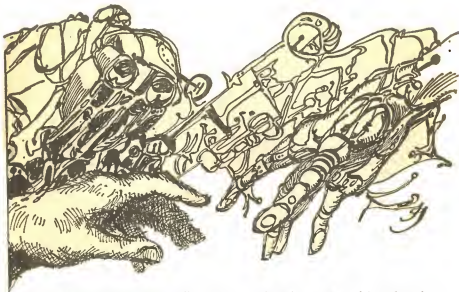
"Ten land divisions!" Grayling was shocked by something else. "That's a million and a half."

"That's not all my friend," Brogas was grim. "Refer to our little list of compiled information, item five; *'Unit must contain within itself the means or factors necessary for the construction of similar units without human intervention.* You can multiply that figure by any number you like. Ten land divisions is Dopey's production target not theirs. We'll have to stand clear until his production quota is finished and then —"

"It will be too damn late," Grayling concluded for him.

Wendell brushed sweat from his face and sighed. He was so frightened now he was almost numb. "I thought we could handle this. I had a pretty little picture of a nice cosy line up of weapons laid on our unit's birthday party, but now — now we've





got to bow and let it trundle past. No wonder prisoners were cocky. They knew Dopey had something laid on for ultimate victory. Several million mechanical creeps can not only threaten the Empire but demand the release of General Greevon as well." He rose abruptly, almost shifting the desk. "We haven't much time left. Let's go down and watch this warrior unit march past disdainfully, knowing we dare not touch it."

"I doubt if a robot would care." Brogas sighed. "The grim fact remains however that we will."

Wendell had imagined the wait would seem long; but the immensely thick door slid aside, and a voice boomed at them before he was ready for either.

"An inspection of the finished

product for groups of less than four is now permitted," said the voice.

They looked at each other doubtfully then Brogas thrust out his chin. "My job, I'm partly responsible."

They watched him walk steadily towards the doorway and pass inside.

It seemed a very long time before he came out, and when he did he avoided their eyes.

"It fulfilled the specifications, I can't get over that." He sounded dazed and unhappy. "Makes you wonder how we began." He shook his head irritably as if trying to clear his mind. "Yes, our friend Greevon had a brilliant idea, but he forgot that all weapons are two edged."

"Surely — " began Grayling, reaching out his hand.

Brogas brushed him aside. "When you've seen it, join me. I have six bottles of very potent illegal brew hidden away in a store room. You'll need a drink then, that's if you can read the writing on the wall — the human race is on its way out." He turned quickly and strode down the corridor.

Wendell stared after him then scowled. There was only one answer, go in and see for himself.

As he entered the door a pointer-arrow appeared on the wall, and he followed it, conscious of a shaky sensation in his stomach and a dry brittle feeling to his skin. He rounded a corner and stopped dead, staring.

Presently he turned and walked

slowly back. Brogas was right, the thing fulfilled the specifications and, unless something was done — what could be done? — yes, the human race was on its way out.

The warrior units, two of them, side by side, had the advantage of specialized education and precise preparation for a specific task. They looked nearly but not quite human. Could you call a robot human? Only they were not quite robots, were they? What did you call an organic robot?

The big tin god had exercised the supreme right of all gods and created life. Dopey had not only fulfilled his orders but *had built himself a man.*

END

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## SF Film Festival

*Continued from page 8*

and paw at people, lengths of plastic tubing pulled into a hole (and then the film run backward, so that they become crawling, seeking worms, reaching out to destroy the hero.)

Then there are the more unusual techniques, like the way in which *Bluebeard's Last Wife* was made: by photographing a succession of stills and filming them in sequence, so that the motion is a bit erratic, a bit hesitant; the girl seems to float across a room rather than walk.

There were others; but what struck this observer as wrong about most of them was that the film-makers, having achieved an effect, went on to re-achieve it over and over again to the point of boredom.

But it seems to us that this sort of exploitation of the capabilities of the film medium, used in restraint,

combined with the use of models and miniatures (at which Hollywood's back-lot boys are absolutely superb), combined finally, with first-rate writing, acting and directing should be able to give us science-fiction films quite up to the imaginative standards of the best sf stories.

To come to this point of view represents quite a change of mind for your correspondent, we must admit, because for years we've doubted that really first-rate sf could ever be done on the screen. But producers of this year's Trieste films have shown that any number of approaches to the subject can be found; all it wants is for some large producer to make the effort of putting them all together.

For that, if nothing else, it seems to us the annual *Festival del Film di Fantascienza* is worth while. And, oh yes, Trieste is a great spot for a vacation! — THE EDITOR

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